

THE FORUM

Bridging the Gap: Toward A Realist-Constructivist Dialogue

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Editor's Note: *J. Samuel Barkin's International Studies Review article "Realist Constructivism" (2003) makes the important point that the opposition between realist and constructivist schools of thought in international relations (IR) may not be as clear-cut as is commonly supposed. In doing so, he focuses on how certain classical realist notions are compatible with constructivist sensibilities about the role of norms and other intersubjective factors in producing social and political outcomes. In effect, Barkin proposes a fusion of certain elements of realism and constructivism to produce a novel IR perspective. Although Barkin is not the first or only scholar to advocate a more evenhanded dialogue between realism and constructivism, his piece is one of the most comprehensive attempts to articulate points of agreement between the two approaches and to delineate the contours of a "realist-constructivist" research program.*

As such, Barkin's piece provides an excellent opportunity for exploring and elaborating the nature of and possibilities for "realist constructivism." Barkin's emphasis on the tension between normative transformation and the limits imposed by power in the international arena is one way to initiate a dialogue between realism and constructivism. The contributors to this Forum are each trying, in their different ways, to further this dialogue and to explore the possibilities raised by dissociating constructivism from the liberal tradition. They share Barkin's basic contention that realism and constructivism are not implacably opposed. However, they disagree with Barkin's specific formulation of realist constructivism. The differences among the contributors also indicate precisely how much is still up for debate in this ongoing discussion. The Forum includes brief statements by each of the contributors, along with a reply by Barkin.

Constructivist Realism or Realist-Constructivism?

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In his article "Realist Constructivism," Barkin (2003:338) described constructivism as a cluster of research methods and analytical tools: a "set of assumptions about how to study world politics" rather than a "set of assumptions about how politics work." As such, constructivism is subject to E.H. Carr's dialectic between realism

and utopianism. Barkin also argued that the problem with contemporary constructivism is that it has been dominated by liberalism and idealism; it would therefore benefit from a healthy infusion of realism. Much of Barkin's essay is aimed at showing that mainstream constructivism is, or can be, broadly compatible with classical realist theory.

Barkin is right that mainstream US constructivism is liberal and idealist. In this respect, his article serves as an important overarching statement of a position implicitly taken by a growing number of constructivist scholars. However, Barkin underplays the real and substantial differences between a commitment to understanding the social world as a product of contingent social interactions, on the one hand, and a commitment to understanding the social world as a result of natural necessity, on the other. These divergent commitments are assumptions about how politics works—assumptions that place constructivism in opposition to both liberal and realist approaches to contemporary international relations.

By ignoring these distinctions, Barkin's arguments amount to a call for a "constructivist realism"—a realism that takes norms and ideas seriously as objects of analysis—rather than a "realist-constructivism"—a constructivism that involves a self-consistent set of arguments about why power cannot be, in any way, transcended in international politics. The latter approach represents the key space in the field occupied by realist-constructivism, and it provides a better basis for promoting both a dialogue within constructivism and a dialogue between constructivism and realism.

Delineating Realist-Constructivism

Where would a properly understood realist-constructivism fit into the disputes between the so-called "isms" in US international relations? One way to map its location is to consider two principal issues: (1) the degree to which international relations are socially constructed, and (2) the degree to which power can be transcended in world politics.

Social Constructivism

According to Barkin (2003:326), constructivism's "defining feature . . . is a focus on the social construction of international politics." This means that constructivists maintain that "what actors do in international relations, the interests they hold, and the structures within which they operate are defined by social norms and ideas, rather than by objective or material conditions." It is based on this latter formulation that Barkin (2003:338) contends that constructivism is a set of research methods rather than a paradigm in "the way that realism and liberalism and, for that matter, Marxism are."

But Barkin's assertion contradicts his definition of constructivism as a focus on the social construction of international politics. As Ian Hacking (1999:6) argues, the core of social construction is the claim that some phenomenon "X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable." Constructivism is inherently about the way politics operates; it entails claims that any given set of political relationships stem, not from natural necessity, but from contingent combinations of social agency (Tilly 1995; Jackson and Nexon 2002). Although constructivists have a far more indeterminate view of how international politics work than realists or liberals, that indeterminacy does not make constructivism merely a set of analytical tools.

Most IR theories involve some level of commitment to the proposition that international politics are socially constructed. Almost no theorist believes that international political outcomes are the inevitable consequence of the nature of things rather than subject to historical and agentic contingency (Guzzini 2000).

Nevertheless, three positions in the study of world politics accept something like “natural necessity.” Two of these—the naïve materialist belief that objective material conditions overdetermine all political outcomes, and the strong sociobiological claim that the most significant parameters of international politics are determined by immutable characteristics of human nature—have few adherents (see, for example, Sterling-Folker 2002). The third position is the argument that international anarchy operates as a strong constraint on actors in world politics. Contemporary realists almost universally argue that anarchy (1) is relatively immutable, (2) has clearly defined and strong implications for actors, and (3) is independent from specific historical configurations of authority and legitimacy (Waltz 1979). Together, these characteristics make anarchy the equivalent of “the nature of things” in world politics.

Contemporary liberals see anarchy as less determinate, but they still generally treat it as an objective parametric constraint. Anarchy, implicitly or explicitly, provides the environment under which actors strategically pursue their interests, whether those interests derive from domestic political coalitions (domestic liberalism) or state-level factors (liberal institutionalism) (Sterling-Folker 1997; Legro and Moravcsik 1999).

Constructivists disagree. As Alexander Wendt (1992:394) argues, “self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy, and . . . if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure.” Not all constructivists would argue, as Wendt does, that anarchy is an empty structure. However, they either argue that anarchy’s consequences for specific political interactions are radically underdetermined, or that the socially constructed nature of anarchy makes it amenable to transformation.

Power and Its Transcendence

The question of whether or not power can be, to some degree, transcended in international politics is at the core of the realist-liberal debate. One of the main concerns of liberal philosophy is to minimize the influence of power on political processes, a position that classical realists labeled “idealism.”

In most forms of contemporary realism, anarchy itself accounts for why power is the *ultima ratio* of international politics. For most liberal theorists, anarchy does create relatively immutable constraints, but the centrality of power can be mitigated or overcome given the right distribution of interests and strategies.

Within constructivism, as Barkin (2003:334) rightly points out, such divisions are obscured because “most current constructivist theorists working in the United States are, in fact, liberal idealists.” Along with liberals, liberal-constructivists believe that considerations of power can, at least in part, be overcome in world politics because anarchy has few effects independent of the norms and identities of actors. Thus, good norms and ideas can transform world politics. Realist-constructivists agree with liberal-constructivists about anarchy being a social construction, but not about the degree to which power can be transcended in world politics.

Locating realist-constructivism in this way gets at what we believe is a fundamental problem with Barkin’s argument. If some constructivists agree with realists that power cannot be transcended in international politics, how might they justify that view? Constructivists cannot rely on the neorealist argument that anarchy is responsible for the centrality of power, and no self-consistent constructivist can refer to sociobiological claims that power politics are rooted in the human genome. Barkin (2003:330) argues that classical realism and constructivism are compatible because a “broad range of theories of human nature . . . are compatible with both realist and constructivist theory.” But this means either that constructivism is just a gloss on realism, or that realism is endogenous to constructivism, which is what theorists such as Wendt have argued all along. In either case, there would be no

point in having a dialogue between realists and constructivists, and there would be no such thing as “realist-constructivism.”

How then can a constructivist argue consistently that power cannot be transcended in politics? An obvious candidate is the post-structural and relational argument that power inheres in social practices, and that the (re)production of stable social relations is always a result of strategic (but not always rational) social action. In short, power, by definition, is always present and implicated in any social formation. Although this may seem like a natural-necessity claim to some readers, it is not. Power is assumed to take different forms under different sociopolitical circumstances, and these forms are part of the analysis—not “givens” that structure reality in immutable ways. Barkin’s (2003:327) tactical decision to avoid discussing “post-modern constructivism,” because it “is generally more accepting of the centrality of power in politics,” prevents him from formulating this more compelling answer. This is ironic, given that Barkin (2003:338) winds up having to refer to “critical” notions of power to flesh out his proposed research program.

Implications

Our alternative framework is illustrated in Figure 1. Once we recognize that “realist-constructivism” necessarily involves post-structural and critical understandings of power, we can better elucidate the points of dialogue and contention between the four ideal-type approaches delineated above. At a basic level, our mapping suggests that liberal-constructivists and realists have minimal grounds for agreement, as do realist-constructivists and liberals. The most fruitful places for dialogue occur along the horizontal and vertical connections between the ideal-type positions, rather than along the diagonals, because it is there that we find both points of agreement and disagreement.

For example, the growing Habermasian turn in liberal-constructivism involves claims that, to the degree that contextual factors (such as institutional design) approximate Habermas’s notion of an “ideal speech condition,” power can be displaced from interactions in world politics. Although realists find this proposition simply absurd—on the grounds that anarchy makes such conditions impossible to find—

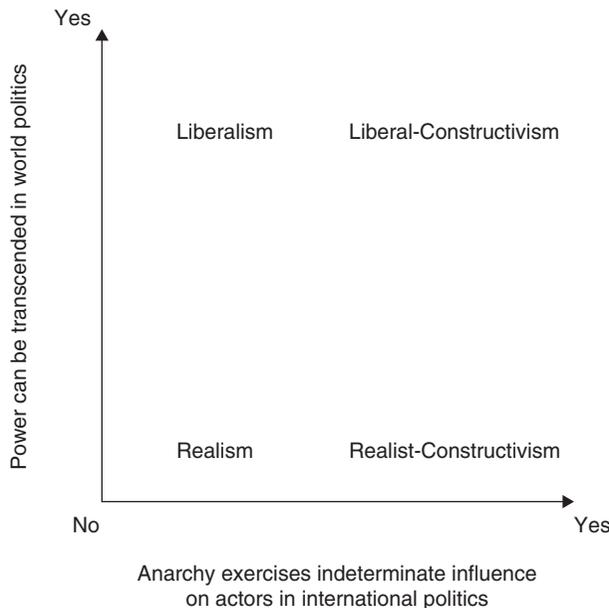


FIG. 1. Alternative Framework

realist-constructivists start from Foucault's position that some form of power is at work even under such conditions. This position allows for two interesting sets of debates: one between liberal-constructivists and realist-constructivists about whether such conditions would eliminate power, and one between realists and realist-constructivists about the precise nature of the power that remains implicated in these situations.

Thus, Barkin correctly calls our attention to distinctions within the broad constructivist research agenda. Liberal-constructivism and realist-constructivism do represent different stances in a larger debate about how international politics work. Yet, both forms of constructivism also differ in significant ways from realism and liberalism. Dialogue between these four positions requires a recognition of points of fundamental disagreement as well as points of similarity. These agreements and disagreements form the basis for constructive debate and empirical investigation (Lapid 2003). On that note, if realist-constructivism is to enter into dialogue with mainline liberal-constructivism on equal terms, it needs to be constituted as a genuine alternative. Barkin's formulation fails to accomplish this key task.

Realist-Constructivism and Morality

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The argument that realism and constructivism can and should be combined is certainly correct; the difficulty lies in how to accomplish the goal. Barkin lays out some preliminary issues that relate to this combination to clear the theoretical minefield of some obvious objections. One of the more important contributions that he makes in this regard is to highlight the relationship between realism and ethics. Barkin is clearly concerned with resurrecting morality as a central component of IR theorizing, noting that the goal of his discussion of liberalism is "to rehabilitate the normative approach to international relations from which both Moravcsik and Wendt are striving to distance themselves" (Barkin 2003:332). In considering the relationship between realism and morality more fully, Barkin confirms that such considerations are entirely consistent with, if not deeply embedded in, classical realist thought.

However, although Barkin reassures us that the realist-constructivist combination will allow us to effectively deal with morality in international relations, he never tells us how it will do so. His analysis suggests that realism and constructivism can simply be layered on top of one another, as if their only differences are epistemological misunderstandings. Yet, realism is the study of what limits human social practices, whereas constructivism is the study of what releases them. This difference is ontological, and the fact that Barkin has not addressed such a fundamental point is clear in his treatment of constructivism. His concern with power and morality leads him to rely so extensively on classical realism in his realist-constructivist combination that ultimately it is not clear whether constructivism is contributing anything that cannot be derived from classical realism alone. By contrast, in their contribution to this symposium, Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon argue that a realist-constructivist combination should be positioned closer to the postmodern end of the constructivist spectrum. They reject both anarchy and human nature as appropriate places to start, arguing that any discussion of realist-constructivist fundamentals must begin with power. Yet, this produces the opposite problem, for what then does realism bring to the analysis and understanding that is not already in postmodernism?

In fact, there are advantages to starting a realist-constructivist combination with human nature—although not with the attributes of fear, aggression, and power-lust that have been the foundations of traditional realism. Lying at the heart of a realist perspective on human nature, even before power or fear, is the observation that human beings are a social species. As Robert Gilpin (1986:305) has observed, “the essence of social reality is the group,” and, as Chris Brown (2001:212) correctly notes, a “recognition of the power of tribalism is crucial to realism.” This assumption is what links realism and constructivism. Both perspectives agree that to understand social reality we must begin with the sociability of the species. What each perspective does with this insight might appear irreconcilable, but they are actually opposite sides of the same ontological coin. It is precisely because we are a social species that, as constructivists argue, we are not actualized as human beings unless we interact with one another (Onuf 1989), and that human social practices and structures are historically contingent. Likewise, it is precisely because we are a social species that, as realists argue, we form groups—implying division, competition, and structural concerns with relative power—and that these dynamics are transhistorical. Paradoxically, sociability accounts for what both perspectives have observed: we are inevitably and simultaneously capable of unity-universalism and division-particularism. These tendencies cannot be separated analytically or philosophically, and discussions of morality must confront the basic dialectic that arises from this ontological coin.

What a realist-constructivist combination promises to reveal in this regard is that, even though morality is both socially constructed and tribal, the content of morality and the relative power of tribes matters a great deal to ethical concerns among and between them. This realization is particularly pertinent in contemporary global life, in which those tribes with the greatest relative power also promote social practices that universalize the value of individuality (Reus-Smit 1999, 2003). A realist-constructivist combination that starts with the social can analyze and understand this phenomenon as a tension that derives from the nexus of historical contingency and structural transhistoricism in the present global system. Such a combination allows us to understand, for example, why genuinely liberal societies constantly behave illiberally in their international relations, even though they simultaneously (and rather perversely) proselytize liberalism in language and deed. It helps us understand how this contradiction is not merely Westphalia’s “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner 1999), but also a result of the human experience itself, in which neither universalism (we are all social) nor particularism (we form groups and so divide) can exist without the other.

To suggest that a realist-constructivist combination can instead “help rehabilitate idealism” (Barkin 2003:336) is to assume that liberalism *is* morality, rather than a social and historical construct that is ultimately contingent on the relative power of those tribes that have created and globally promoted it. It is precisely this point that IR liberalism will always miss. In his discussion of prior periods of liberal theorizing, Brown (2001:212) has captured the realist critique in this regard: “Liberal internationalists who believed themselves to be more-or-less free of tribalism simply did not and could not realize that others remained in its thrall. Even more damagingly, they did not realize that their own freedom was illusory—that in denying the relevance of tribalism they were, allegedly, actually pursuing their own tribal interests.” Not unexpectedly, the inability to take tribalism seriously remains a central feature of contemporary liberal IR scholarship, which dominates IR theorizing in ways that make it difficult to even discuss morality. This blindness to tribalism certainly characterizes the US state and society at large, which are completely incapable of understanding not only that some differences are irreconcilable but also that the pursuit of the United States’ own tribal interests is not the same thing as the realization of the universal liberal values that inform its own existence.

To be fair, Barkin understands this to a large extent, but his vision of realist-constructivism remains deeply problematic. To argue, as Barkin (2003:337) does, that a realist-constructivist combination will allow us to “examine skeptically from a moral perspective the interrelationships between power and international norms” is to ignore the fact that the moral perspective to which he is referring is actually liberalism. As Roger Spegele (2001) has argued, moral skepticism derives not from realism’s recognition of difference, but from liberalism’s refusal of it. Hence, what is morally distinct about realism is not a skepticism about power and universal norms, but an insistence that morality is contextually specific and so particularism must be respected. Combining realism with constructivism should not suddenly lead to the sort of moral skepticism that is inherent in liberalism. It should instead lead to a moral perspective that demands that particularism and universalism be, somehow, simultaneously respected. It should produce “an ethical way of being” that recognizes “the very *necessity* of heterogeneity for understanding ourselves and others” (Der Derian 1997:58, emphasis in original), and a position that “accepts the indispensability of identity and lives within the medium of identity while *refusing* . . . to live its own identity as the truth” (Connolly 1989:331, emphasis in original).

To suggest, alternatively, that a realist-constructivist combination “could study the relationship between normative structures, the carriers of political morality, and uses of power” (Barkin 2003:338) is to marry it to the blandest of liberal research programs. Ultimately, what Barkin appears inadvertently to be suggesting is a realist-constructivist combination in which classical realism assists liberal IR scholars in understanding why power keeps getting in the way of desirable normative structures. This realist-constructivist combination not only ignores the fundamentals of both realism and constructivism, it also threatens to keep us on the same old theoretical treadmill—running in place and going nowhere fast in a liberal discipline that cannot imagine things any other way.

Power in Realist-Constructivist Research

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Samuel Barkin is correct: constructivism and realism do have more to say to each other than the IR literature might lead one to think. What is unclear, however, is the extent to which Barkin has compellingly outlined the parameters of such a conversation. In this Forum, both Jackson and Nexon and Jennifer Sterling-Folker object that he has not, each arguing, for different reasons, that Barkin has defined the terms of the conversation in a way that sells the potential of realist constructivism short. I agree—for yet different reasons. Specifically, if we take Barkin’s rendition of realist constructivism at face value and then proceed to engage the research agenda it implies, we are not likely to glean any particularly novel insights about international politics. Indeed, Barkin’s realist constructivism appears to offer exactly the same insights as the liberal-constructivist approach against which his realist constructivism is positioned. What we need is a realist-constructivist approach that emphasizes the forms and expressions of power entailed in social construction. This focus implies an innovative research agenda that not only can, but already has generated novel insights about international politics.

Consider Barkin’s realist constructivism. As he describes its logic, it is not a theory about how international politics works, but a method for studying international

politics. This means realist constructivism should be understood as a set of practices, procedures, or guidelines for inquiry into the substantive problems of international relations. Outlining those research guidelines, Barkin (2003:337) argues that realist constructivism involves an analytic focus on the dialectic between ideals and power. In essence, it consists of a focus on how “power structures affect patterns of normative change in international relations” and “how a particular set of norms affects power structures.” As vague as this sounds, sympathetically inclined individuals will nevertheless accept that it has the potential to provide a rich framework for analyzing the substantive puzzles of international relations. Yet, the benchmark for evaluating Barkin’s realist-constructivist method must be the extent to which it offers some kind of leverage for solving those puzzles that evade the analytical capability of liberal constructivism.

Take, for example, the puzzle of how security communities emerge and persist in the international system—a puzzle that, as Barkin (2003:335) argues, has been analyzed in a “non-self critical fashion” by liberal constructivists. Security communities can be understood as regimes of order in which member states share a collective commitment to and compliance with the norm of nonviolence with respect to their interactions with each other. To perform the more self-critical analysis on security communities that is promised by realist constructivism, Barkin (2003:338) proposes a focus on “the relationship between normative structures, the carriers of political morality, and the uses of power.” When speaking of security communities, this approach requires that we focus on the relationship between power and the agents or process through which the norm of nonviolence is formed, politically legitimated, and maintained.

Yet, this allegedly more self-critical mode of analysis looks surprisingly similar to the method that the liberal constructivists, whom Barkin (2003:335) cites as being non-self-critical, use to study security communities. For example, in analyzing the formation and persistence of security communities, Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (1998) do just as Barkin proposes. They focus explicitly on the norm of nonviolence, asking how it became constituted among states through specific powerful and morally compelling agents. What they argue is that the norm of nonviolence is constituted among states who share “we-ness identity.” We-ness identity, in turn, is constituted through a combination of permissive material power conditions and proximate “ideational” power conditions—such as magnetic attraction, legitimacy, and moral authority—that become embedded in specific state actors (Adler and Barnett 1998, see especially the diagram on p. 38). In short, Adler and Barnett deploy all of the analytic lenses demanded by Barkin’s realist constructivism: the dialectic between ideas and power, with a specific focus on the carriers of norms and morality.

In light of this, one must wonder exactly what realist constructivism does to improve upon liberal constructivism in practical research terms. To be certain, liberal constructivism does not require one to study power as Barkin’s realist constructivism does. However, this point is a rather trivial one on which to stake the distinction between liberal and realist constructivism given that, in the end, it is unlikely that any students of international politics will completely ignore power in their inquiries. Importantly, when liberal constructivists do take power into account, as Adler and Barnett do, the differences between liberal constructivism and realist constructivism quickly dissolve. In this sense, Barkin’s realist constructivism does not offer much of an “opportunity” to “move beyond” the existing stock of non-self-critical knowledge offered by liberal idealist constructivists (Barkin 2003:338). It just highlights the need to remember to take power into account, which liberal constructivists already recognize.

For those of us who see the possibility for a fruitful realist-constructivist combination, this result is disappointing. However, it need not (and should not) be the end of the story. A number of different ways exist to formulate the parameters of

such a combination so that it does “move beyond” what can be offered by extant frameworks for analysis. For instance, a realist-constructivist approach could begin, as realism does, with the conviction that power is impossible to transcend in international life (Waltz 1979). In addition, like classical realism in particular, it could recognize that power comes in a multiplicity of forms—such as moral authority, force, and even care—and can be expressed in a multiplicity of fashions—for instance through material, ideational, symbolic, and linguistic means (Carr 1964; Machiavelli 1994). Furthermore, this approach would recognize that each of these forms of power affects the conduct and dynamics of international politics differently. Finally, like constructivism—whether liberal, postmodern, or otherwise—this realist-constructivist approach should recognize that the very conduct and dynamics of international politics are intersubjectively and culturally constituted constructs (Campbell 1992; Wendt 1999).

The combination of these premises adds up to a more distinct analytical approach than the one imagined by Barkin. The change in label itself—from “realist constructivism” to “realist-constructivist”—is significant. Consistent with the discussions by Jackson and Nexon and Sterling-Folker, a realist-constructivist approach denotes the emergence of a unique school of thought, and not simply a constructivism with realist characteristics. First, because it takes international politics as a whole to be socially constructed, the injunction is not just—as in Barkin’s approach—to study norms and rules as social constructs (Barkin 2003:338), but to study *everything* in international relations as social constructs—from morality, ideals, and such liberal topics as security communities to self-interest, fear, and such realist topics as the balance of power. Second, it allows for a much deeper connection between power and social construction than is implied by Barkin, and, in this sense, it takes power more seriously. In particular, as Barkin formulates his method, such things as power, norms, and rules are discrete (albeit socially constructed) variables upon which we can perform a dialectical analysis. However, viewing power as productive rather than as discrete is more consistent with the logic of social construction because it treats power itself as part of the process by which norms and other sociopolitical realities are constituted. In this sense, the “critical conception” of power that Barkin (2003:338) mentions but glosses over is put front and center in the analysis (see also Bially Mattern forthcoming).

Finally, because in this view power is understood to take many forms and to be expressed in many ways, it is not enough to simply note that power is productive or to treat it as passively enacted through social relationships (as postmodernists do, for instance). Rather, given its variegated forms and expressions, the various agentic processes through which different forms and expressions of power produce realities are themselves a matter into which realist-constructivist research must inquire. In short, power is a question to be investigated, not a variable or process to be accounted for.

As a set of guidelines from which to do research, this realist-constructivist account works discernibly differently than Barkin’s rendition. Whereas the latter guides the researcher to consider the dialectical relationships among extant entities (norms and rules, the carriers of morality, and power—which is a concept that is never unpacked), this approach guides the researcher to consider how specific actors wield different *forms* of power (authority, force, care, and so on) through different *expressions* (linguistic, symbolic, material, and so on) to *produce* different social realities. It guides the researcher to think like a classical realist about the variety of power while guiding him or her to analyze the role of that power in international political life like a constructivist.

Returning to the question of how security communities emerge and persist, it becomes apparent that this realist-constructivist orientation can indeed move beyond the liberal-constructivist approach in a way that Barkin’s realist constructivism

can not. In this case the research task would be formulated as a question about the forms and expressions of power that actors use to produce the norm of nonviolence and so the security community. Research focusing on just this question illustrates that under certain circumstances statesmen and diplomats use a *forceful* form of power, which is expressed through *linguistic structures*, to produce and sustain security communities (Bially Mattern 2001). Compared to Adler and Barnett's liberal-constructivist account (in which security communities are made possible by permissive material conditions and magnetic power), the detection of forceful linguistic power in this process is a novel and important finding.

Of course, given these two different accounts of security communities, an empirical question about which is more correct arises. It is impossible to answer that empirical question with a method that either does not explicitly recognize power (as is the case for liberal constructivism) or that does not force its researchers to wrestle with the variegated forms and expressions of power that produce international politics (as is the case for Barkin's realist constructivism). Indeed, this is the larger problem with Barkin's constructivism. Because it does not make power the first point of inquiry, nothing forces the researcher to think in novel ways beyond those ad hoc but nevertheless power-conscious accounts of international politics offered by liberal constructivists.

Constructive Realism

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Samuel Barkin rightly observes that some realists and constructivists possess limited understandings of the other's paradigm that exaggerate their incompatibility. By stepping back from stereotypes, we can discover ways in which these approaches can contribute in synergistic ways to the study of international relations. An analysis of Thucydides (Lebow 2001) prompted this conclusion, as did a more recent book (Lebow 2003) that resurrects the wisdom of classical realism through readings of Thucydides, Carl von Clausewitz, and Hans J. Morgenthau. All three realists were interested in questions that are often considered the preserve of constructivists; all three maintained that identities and values were more important determinants of policy than the constraints and opportunities of the external environment.

From these studies, two ways in which the realist and constructivist traditions can, and need to, work in tandem can be discerned. The first pertains to the modalities that govern the ends actors seek and the means they use to achieve these ends; the second involves the kinds of worlds in which liberal and realist assumptions give us the most analytical leverage. Constructivist approaches can provide insights—if not answers—to both questions. Indeed, they are really different facets of the same question. This unity provides a compelling reason for considering realist, liberal, and constructivist paradigms that are capable of providing separate but interlocking pieces that fit together to help solve a larger puzzle.

Let us first consider the ancient Greeks. Their poets, playwrights, and philosophers were interested in human goals, and they distinguished between two kinds of impulses: appetite (*epithumein*) and spirit (*thumos* or *pathos*). The former impulse pertained to bodily needs—like food, shelter, sex, and all their more sophisticated expressions. The latter impulse was manifested in the competitive quest for recognition, understood to be the basis for self-esteem. Unlike the moderns, who conceive of reason as merely instrumental, Plato (1961:441c1-2, 441e4, 442c5-6) and Aristotle (1984:1095b14-96a10, 1177a18-78a8-79a32) maintained that reason

generated desires of its own. It sought to apprehend the ends of life and restrain and train appetite and spirit to collaborate to promote happiness (*eudaimonia*) and well-being.

To the Greeks, psychological balance—a harmonious relationship among reason, appetite, and spirit—promoted good decisions, happiness, and justice. Imbalance led to bad decisions, unhappiness, and behavior at odds with the real interests of the individual and community. Thucydides, Plato, and Aristotle considered the principle of balance equally applicable to states, and they attributed civil disorder to psychological imbalance within the political culture of the polis. For Thucydides, Athens and Sparta illustrated the two different ways in which good regimes deteriorate: reason can lose control of the appetite, as in Athens, or reason can lose control of the spirit, as in Sparta. For Plato (1961:439d1-2, 553d4-7), oligarchic people and regimes are ruled by their spirit, and democratic people and regimes are ruled by their appetite. The difficulty of appeasing the spirit or appetite, or of discriminating among competing appetites, propels both kinds of people and regimes down the road to excess and tyranny.

The Greeks thought people were motivated by interest, honor, and fear. Interest and honor are expressions of the appetite and spirit, respectively. Fear becomes a motive, often the dominant one, if appetite or interest break free of the restraints normally imposed by reason and threaten the well-being of other actors. Unrestrained competition for wealth or standing can weaken or destroy *nomos* (rules, mores, laws, and institutions) at any level of order. The most fundamental question in politics—domestic or international—may be the conditions that promote or retard psychological balance and order.

Honor or standing is a dominant value in many traditional societies, and it was the primary goal within the European regional system before the French Revolution. If honor were available for everyone, no one could possess it. Honor-driven worlds are thus highly competitive, but they also require a high degree of consensus and cooperation. Honor is only meaningful if recognized and praised by others. It is often conferred by others, as was *hegemonia* in ancient Greece and as is great power status today. Without a robust society (domestic, regional, or international) with important shared values and accepted procedures for conferring status, standing cannot exist. Honor-based systems are thus characterized by an acute tension between the competition by which standing is achieved and the cooperation and restraint that make it possible. To sustain themselves, they ultimately rely on individual and collective reason to exercise self-restraint. Odysseus and Frederick the Great understood and respected these limits. Agamemnon and Louis XIV did not.

Appetite—especially appetite for wealth—becomes dominant if the individual emerges as a separate identity, a phenomenon associated with the proto-Enlightenment of fifth-century Greece and its modern European counterpart. Wealth can be achieved through conquest or crass exploitation. Such strategies are inefficient in generating wealth compared to the postwar national variants of capitalism that John Ruggie (1983) has described as “embedded” liberalism, in which national economies and international trade and investment rest on a series of shared understandings and compacts. The latter approach is a product of reason and experience. Reason designed mechanisms of domestic and international collaboration, whereas experience—especially the memories of the horrendous economic and political consequences of “beggar thy neighbor policies”—generated fear of unrestrained competition. The phenomenal success of the postwar economic and political system fed on itself and created additional incentives to sustain and expand the collaborative enterprise.

If honor and interest are important motives, conflict and war are likely, but the ends and means of foreign policy will be limited. Interests, especially economic ones, generally depend on the well-being, even prosperity of other actors, just as

honor requires the preservation of society and its members. The frequency of war in such worlds will vary according to its perceived destructiveness, the robustness of regional society, and the nature of external threats. Fear will become the dominant motive if regional or international society weakens or dissipates, or threats from the outside are perceived as severe. Realism is most appropriate in this kind of world. Thucydides (1996:6.8-27) documented in his Sicilian Debate how deterrence cannot keep the peace in these conditions, and how resulting wars are likely to be more general and destructive.

Social scientists have paradigms that capture two of the three generic motives identified by the Greeks. Liberalism is rooted in appetite; realism is rooted in fear. No paradigm is based on honor, although it is an important motive at every level of social interaction. Even wealth, as Thorstein Veblen (1898) noted, is often sought, not as an end, but as a means of achieving standing and self-esteem. The clash between liberalism and realism turns on the extent to which international relations is distinct from domestic politics because the former lacks a Leviathan. Many realists assert that international relations is a self-help system in which states must rely on their military capabilities to protect themselves. Many liberals contend that the dense network of institutions and profitable exchanges that bind together the developed economies of the world have enabled them to escape the security dilemma and get on with the business of generating wealth.

Even if liberals are right, this does not mean that power is no longer central to pluralistic security communities. Developed states and influential interest groups will always have clashing preferences, and the outcomes of these disputes will be influenced by their relative power. At the same time, in security communities constraints exist on the kinds of power that can be brought to bear: military threats and economic sanctions (beyond those allowed by trade treaties) are beyond the pale. Losers are expected to comply even in the absence of mechanisms of enforcement. Liberals explain self-restraint and compliance in terms of institutions and the strategic reasoning they promote. But such behavior is for the most part normative and an expression of the partially collective identities that relevant actors have formed. These identities have created a sense of obligation—something qualitatively different from compliance based on self-interest and strategic reasoning (Finnemore and Toope 2001; Reus-Smit 2003). They have also made compliance more palatable by restraining actors from seeking outcomes that deny others benefits or expectations of benefits in the future. This is why the more unilateral behavior of the Bush administration—whose leading luminaries do not share these collective identities and wisdom—has aroused such vocal opposition from the United States' closest allies.

Constructivist approaches take identity formation as their principal puzzle, and therefore they constitute our first line of inquiry into international relations. Constructivism does not have to be wedded to liberalism—as Barkin notes—or to any substantive paradigm. By describing identities, constructivism tells us which of them is likely to provide the most analytical leverage in a given system. As the Greeks recognized, actors in all worlds are motivated by some combination of interest, honor, and fear. Thus, no one paradigm ever suffices. We need to know which motive or motives predominate in a system or epoch and the extent to which they are constrained by reason. If balance prevails, fear will be minimal—just as it will be foremost under conditions of imbalance, that is, conditions in which *nomos* has broken down and rapacious actors ignore institutions or attempt to exploit them to advance their parochial goals. World politics is a composite of regional systems, each of which may be characterized by a different mix of identities and motives. Thus, realism, liberalism, constructivism, and a paradigm based on honor will all tell us something important. A more comprehensive understanding of international relations—and especially of the ways in which systems evolve and transform themselves—will require a synergistic, cross-paradigm approach.

Realist Constructivism and Realist-Constructivisms

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“Realist Constructivism” (Barkin 2003) endeavored to make the case that classical realist theory and constructivist approaches to the study of international relations are not implacably opposed, as has been claimed by self-described realist and constructivist scholars of international relations theory. As such, the goal of the article was to create a set of permissive conditions for a realist constructivism (unhyphenated, understood as a general approach rather than as a specific theory)—that is, a footnote that future students of international relations could use rather than have to make the case themselves that the two are not incompatible. In creating a set of permissive conditions, my hope was that a variety of specific realist-constructivisms (hyphenated, understood as more specific theories of international relations within the general approach of realist constructivism) could be created, each suitable to particular research questions and each contributing to a broader conversation on realist constructivism in the study of international relations.

This Forum constitutes the beginning of such a conversation. The four theoretical formulations in this Forum suggest at least two axes on which specific realist-constructivisms might differ: (1) how to understand power, and (2) how to deal with the relationships among power, idealism, and liberalism. These questions provide two fruitful areas for a discussion of the potentialities and limits of realist constructivism in general.

Power as a concept is involved in this conversation in two ways. The first is the status of power in a realist constructivism. Three of the four essays in this Forum argue that power cannot be transcended in international relations. The outlier, Richard Ned Lebow’s essay, suggests that power is central to the study of international relations, but it is only one necessary focus among many. But even among the three essays that argue that power cannot be transcended, disagreement exists about the ontological basis of a focus on power in a realist constructivism. Janice Bially Mattern begins with a conviction that power matters, but not an argument as to why. Jackson and Nexon find such an approach insufficient, and they argue that a focus on the centrality of power must be justified. They dismiss as justification both neorealist arguments and arguments that draw on sociobiological claims. In the end, they deal with the problem by drawing on post-structural arguments that power inheres in social structures by definition. Sterling-Folker, meanwhile, draws precisely on those sociobiological claims that Jackson and Nexon dismiss, arguing that humans are by nature a social species. In short, then, these three realist-constructivisms all share a focus on power as a core concept, but they have central disagreements about the ontological status of the concept. A discussion among them that clarifies this debate would prove a useful exercise in delineating the parameters of a broader realist constructivism.

The second way in which power is involved in this conversation involves the question of what counts as power. A range of answers is offered in the four essays, but this range is smaller than that with respect to the ontological status of power. Lebow is once again the outlier, seemingly looking at power as a residual category: as that which explains what happens outside the realm of collective identity—when fear trumps interest and honor. In the other three essays, power is seen as more pervasive. Both Jackson and Nexon and Sterling-Folker see power as embedded in all social structures, but they do not define it beyond that. Bially Mattern finds this approach insufficient, and she argues that the concept of power needs to be unpacked, and that both the different forms and different expressions of power need to be examined.

This latter conception of power—that it takes a variety of forms and expressions that are contextually dependent, that it is embedded in social institutions, and that it is involved in the production and reproduction of those institutions—is presumably a common ground for realist-constructivisms. After all, if power is core to international politics, and international politics are socially constructed, then power itself must be a social construct. The contextual contingency of power as a social construct suggests that, even though it is certainly necessary to unpack the concept and specify its particular forms and expressions for individual research projects and perhaps even for individual realist-constructivisms, it is impossible to do so for realist constructivism in general.

One caveat to this constructivist understanding of power should, however, be noted: to define everything as power is to undermine the analytic utility of the concept. Furthermore, to use power to explain all social interaction risks traveling beyond what Ole Waever E. H. (1996:169) calls the “boundary of negativity.” An exclusive focus on power can tell us nothing about the ends to which power is used. It is this observation that Carr (1964) focused on in speaking of a dialectic of power and utopia—of power and ideals. This dialectic is another part of the conversation on realist constructivism implicit in this Forum. This dialectic is involved in the conversation in two ways. The first is through the mechanics of the dialectic itself; the second is through the relationship between idealism and liberalism.

In two of the four essays in this Forum, the dialectic between power and ideals does not appear at all. Lebow cites ancient Greek thought as seeing power as rooted in fear, and fear as a result of the failure of reason to restrain appetite and honor (honor presumably being related to ideals). In other words, for him power is a default condition if people cease behaving reasonably. Jackson and Nexon, conversely, see liberalism, the only idealism with which they deal, as simply the absence of power. In other words, idealism is the default condition in the absence of power. Neither position seems accepting of a dialectical relationship between power and ideals, but they seem to begin ontologically at opposite ends of the power-ideals relationship. It is not clear whether this opposition comes from the specification of particular realist-constructivisms that hold different positions within a broader realist constructivism that the authors of the two essays recognize, or whether they disagree fundamentally on the ontological priority of power and ideals. In the former case, they may be accepting of a dialectical relationship; in the latter, not.

Bially Mattern rejects the power-ideals dialectic, but in doing so she seems to misspecify it. She suggests that a dialectical relationship considers the interactions of extant entities. But the basic point of a dialectical relationship is that neither thesis nor antithesis can exist without the other. Such a relationship implies that we cannot understand ideals without reference to power, and we cannot understand power without reference to ideals. Defined as such, it seems likely that Bially Mattern would be more sympathetic to the dialectic.

Sterling-Folker does not address this dialectic between power and ideals directly, although she is clearly sympathetic to dialectical thought more generally. She does, however, disagree with the contention that seeing the relationship dialectically can help rehabilitate idealism. She argues that to suggest this is to equate idealism with its specifically liberal variant, as liberal constructivism does. But a realist constructivism that is skeptical of claims to moral universality requires that idealist constructivism question its own claims to moral universality. Such skepticism, which is closer to what Spegele (2001) refers to as “theory skepticism,” is different from the liberal skepticism that *any* political act can be moral to which Sterling-Folker points. Hence a power-ideals dialectic that rehabilitates idealism is not necessarily a form of liberalism. In the end, a realist constructivism that sees power as socially contingent and as implicated in the social construction of ideals (of morality) needs to be in a dialectical relationship with an idealist constructivism that sees ideals as socially contingent and as implicated in the social construction of power.

As a final note on the realist constructivism conversation, we must also confront the “so what” question. Most of the authors in this Forum question in a variety of ways what realist constructivism has to add to traditional realism, on the one hand, and to liberal constructivism, on the other. The answer to the first question can be found both in ontology and in methodology. Sterling-Folker notes that “realism is the study of what limits human social practices, whereas constructivism is the study of what releases them.” Constructivism adds to classical realism an ontological basis for understanding the social construction of politics in general, and of power in particular, that both applies to and transcends realist principles. Constructivism also provides a set of methodologies for the study of politics and power, including but not limited to those discussed by Sterling-Folker and Bially Mattern, that were not available to the classical realists. Jackson and Nexon may dismiss any discussion of methodology as “merely a set of analytic tools” (although the question of how method becomes “mere” would make an interesting discussion on the social construction of the discipline of international relations). But methodology cannot be dismissed so lightly. A theory of politics that claims to be contextual but is unable to access actual context is of little use.

The answer to the second “so what” question is that a realist constructivism adds to liberal constructivism an understanding that power is not only instrumental. Power is implicated not only in determining which social structures triumph over others, but in the construction of those structures in the first place.

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