

# 9

## Methodological Debates: Post-Positivist Approaches

<b>Critical Theory</b>	248
<b>Postmodernism</b>	250
<b>Constructivism</b>	253
<b>Normative Theory</b>	259
<b>Explaining IR Versus Understanding IR</b>	262
KEY POINTS	264
QUESTIONS	265
GUIDE TO FURTHER READING	266
WEB LINKS	266

### **SUMMARY**

Positivist methodologies in IR provoked post-positivist reactions including critical theory, postmodernism, constructivism, and normative theory. Post-positivism also is a broad church. All these methodological approaches are elaborate and complicated and each one displays internal disagreements among its advocates. We can only touch on the basics of each. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a fundamental division between IR scholars who think that objective methods can be used to give scientific explanations of international relations and IR scholars who think that is impossible and that the most that IR scholarship can achieve is knowledgeable interpretations of international relations.



## Critical Theory

This methodological approach is mainly a development of Marxist thought and could be described as neo-Marxism. It was developed by a small group of German scholars many of whom were living in exile in the United States. They were known collectively as 'the Frankfurt School'. In IR critical theory is closely linked to Marxist IPE (see Chapter 6). Two leading IR critical theorists are Robert Cox (1981; 1996) and Andrew Linklater (1990; 1996). Critical theorists reject three basic postulates of positivism: an objective external reality; the subject/object distinction; and value-free social science. According to critical theorists, there is no world politics or global economics which operates in accordance with immutable social laws. The social world is a construction of time and place: the international system is a specific construction of the most powerful states. Everything that is social, including international relations, is changeable and thus historical. Since world politics are constructed rather than discovered, there is no fundamental distinction between subject (the analyst) and object (the focus of analysis).

For critical theorists knowledge is not and cannot be neutral either morally or politically or ideologically. All knowledge reflects the interests of the observer. Knowledge is always biased because it is produced from the social perspective of the analyst. Knowledge thus discloses an inclination—conscious or unconscious—toward certain interests, values, groups, parties, classes, nations, etc. All IR theories are biased too. Robert Cox (1981) expressed that view in a frequently quoted remark: 'Theory is always for someone and for some purpose'. Cox draws a distinction between positivist or 'problem-solving' knowledge and critical or 'emancipatory' knowledge. Problem-solving knowledge is conservative: it seeks to know that which exists at present. It is biased towards the international *status quo* which is based on inequality of power and excludes many people. It cannot lead to knowledge of human progress and emancipation which is the knowledge that critical theorists seek to provide. According to Robert Cox (1996) critical theory contains an element of historical utopianism.

### Box 9.1 Robert Cox on critical theory as historical utopianism

Critical theory allows for a normative choice in favor of a social and political order different from the prevailing order, but it limits the range of choice to alternative orders which are feasible transformations of the existing world . . . Critical theory thus contains an element of utopianism in the sense that it can represent a coherent picture of an alternative order, but its utopianism is constrained by its comprehension of historical processes. It must reject improbable alternatives just as it rejects the permanency of the existing order.

Robert Cox (1996). *Approaches to World Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 90



Critical theory is not confined to an examination of states and the state system but focuses more widely on power and domination in the world generally. Critical theorists seek knowledge for a political purpose: to liberate humanity from the 'oppressive' structures of world politics and world economics which are controlled by hegemonic powers, particularly the capitalist United States. They seek to unmask the global domination of the rich North over the poor South. Critical theorists in this regard are almost indistinguishable from Marxists IPE scholars. Their orientation toward progressive change and their desire to use theory to help bring about such change is also reminiscent of Idealism. Critical theorists are openly political: they advocate and promote their progressive (usually socialist) ideology of emancipation believing that conservative scholars and liberal scholars are defending and promoting their political values. Critical theorists thus believe that theoretical debates are basically political debates. Like the inter-war idealists, critical theorists are trying to bring about the social and political revolution that their ideology proclaims. The difference is: critical theorists reject the possibility of academic detachment and objectivity, whereas the idealists were blissfully unaware of it.

Their view of knowledge as inherently political separates critical theorists from behavioralists, from those positivists who disdain using scientific knowledge for political purposes, and from classical theorists. According to critical theorists, IR scholars cannot be detached from the subject matter they are studying because they are connected with it in many subtle and some not so subtle ways. They are part of the human world they are studying. They are involved in that world. Whether they realize it or not social scientists and social science are instruments of power. Critical theorists seek to identify the political interests that different IR theories and theorists serve. But even more than that: they seek to use their knowledge to advance what they believe is the ultimate end of all knowledge: the great goal of human emancipation from global social structures which until now have privileged a relatively small minority of the world's population at the expense of the majority. Critical IR theory can thus be understood as explicitly and avowedly revolutionary: it seeks to overthrow the existing world political and economic system.

The main problem with this outlook is the problem it poses for academic independence and the integrity of scholarly and scientific research. If 'theory is always for someone and for some purpose' how can anyone decide whether it is a good theory in purely academic terms? The value of any theory would be based on political values: does it promote my political or ideological beliefs? It would not be based on academic values: does it shed light on the world, increase our rational knowledge of it, and ultimately demystify it? If IR theory is really political rather than scientific or scholarly there is no neutral way to decide which theory is the best academically. If that is so there can be no truly academic disagreements and controversies. Academic debates would really be political debates in disguise. But if IR theories and all other social science theories really are political how can we



justify them as academic subjects? Why should critical theory or any IR theory be taken as a statement of knowledge if it is really a statement of politics? If theory is always an expression of political interests rather than academic curiosity, political science is neither science nor scholarship: it is politics. All of that may of course be true. But if it is true it is hard to justify IR scholarship (including this book) in purely academic terms.

A moderate version of critical theory is: no knowledge is completely value-free but even when that is the case there is a difference between pure partisan politics and intellectual understanding and scientific knowledge sought by progressive IR theorists. That academic enterprise does not take place in complete isolation from or ignorance of politics, but it does attempt to come up with systematic and detached analysis. Robert Cox's work is an example of how critical theorists struggle with finding their place between these views. While he is a political advocate for radical change, he is also the author of scholarly works that are widely recognized in the academic study of IR.

---

## Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a social theory that originated among a group of post-war French philosophers who rejected the philosophy of existentialism which was prevalent in France in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Postmodernism did not enter IR until the 1980s, however. A leading postmodern theorist in IR is Richard Ashley (1996). Like critical theorists, postmodernists seek to make scholars aware of their conceptual prisons (Vasquez 1995). The most important conceptual prison is that of modernity itself and the whole idea that modernization leads to progress and a better life for all (for this idea, see Chapter 4). Postmodernists cast doubt on the modern belief that there can be objective knowledge of social phenomena. They are critical of classical liberals who believe in 'enlightenment': e.g. Kant. They are also critical of contemporary positivists who believe in 'science': e.g. Waltz. Both Kant and Waltz are wedded to a belief in the advancement of human knowledge which postmodernists regard as erroneous and unfounded. Postmodernists see neorealism as the epitome of intellectual error and academic arrogance. Neorealism is the prime example of an intellectual prison that postmodernists see themselves breaking out of.

Postmodern IR theorists reject the notion of objective truth. They dispute the idea that there is or can be an ever-expanding knowledge of the human world. Such beliefs are intellectual illusions—i.e. they are subjective beliefs, like a religious faith. The neorealists may think that they have found the truth about IR, but they are mistaken. Postmodernists pour cold water on the belief that knowledge can expand and improve, thus giving humans increasing mastery over



not only the natural world but also the social world including the international system. They are deeply skeptical of the idea that institutions can be fashioned that are fair and just for all of humankind: men and women everywhere. They debunk the notion of universal human progress.

Postmodernism has been defined as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1984: xxiv). Metanarratives are accounts such as neorealism or neo-liberalism that claim to have discovered the truth about the social world. Postmodernists consider such claims to be far-fetched and lacking in credibility. The great theoretical constructions of IR such as realism or liberalism are houses of cards that will fall down with the first breeze of deconstructive criticism. Postmodernists argue, for example, that neorealist claims about the unchanging anarchical structure of international politics cannot be sustained because there are no independent and impartial grounds for judging them. There are no such grounds because social science is not neutral; rather, it is historical, it is cultural, it is political and therefore biased. Every theory, including neorealism, decides for itself what counts as ‘facts.’ There is no neutral or impartial or independent standpoint to decide between rival empirical claims. Empirical theory is myth. In other words, there is no objective reality; everything involving human beings is subjective. Knowledge and power are intimately related; knowledge is not at all ‘immune from the workings of power’ (Smith 1997: 181); see Box 9.2.

#### **Box 9.2 Postmodernist view of knowledge and power**

All power requires knowledge and all knowledge relies on and reinforces existing power relations. Thus there is no such thing as ‘truth’, existing outside of power. To paraphrase Foucault, how can history have a truth if truth has a history? Truth is not something external to social settings, but is instead part of them . . . Postmodern international theorists have used this insight to examine the ‘truths’ of international relations to see how the concepts and knowledge-claims that dominate the discipline in fact are highly contingent on specific power relations.

Smith (1997: 181)

Postmodernists are deconstructivists who speak of theories as ‘narratives’ or ‘metanarratives’. Narratives or metanarratives are always constructed by a theorist and they are thus always contaminated by his or her standpoint and prejudices. They can thus be deconstructed: i.e. taken apart to disclose their arbitrary elements and biased intentions. The main target of postmodernist deconstruction in IR is neorealism. Here is a theory which claims that only a few elements of information about sovereign states in an anarchical international system can tell us most of the big and important things we need to know about



international relations. And the theory even claims to validly explain international politics 'through all the centuries we can contemplate' (Waltz 1995: 75).

Postmodernist critiques of neorealism target the anarchical structure and ahistorical bias of the theory (Ashley 1986: 289; Walker 1993: 123). The theory is ahistorical and that in turn leads to a form of reification in which historically produced social structures are presented as unchangeable constraints given by nature. Emphasis is on 'continuity and repetition' (Walker 1995: 309). Individual actors are 'reduced in the last analysis to mere objects who must participate in reproducing the whole or . . . fall by the wayside of history' (Ashley 1986: 291). It follows that neorealism has big difficulties in confronting change in international relations. This discloses a poverty of theoretical imagination. Any thought about alternative futures remains frozen between the stark alternatives of either domestic sovereign statehood and international anarchy or the (unlikely) abolition of sovereign statehood and the creation of world government.

What is the contribution of postmodernist IR methodology? One benefit is the deflation of academic egos and conceits: scholars typically claim too much for their theories. Neorealism is a good example of that: it does not really live up to its billing; it provides less knowledge of IR than it claims to provide. Another benefit is the skepticism that postmodernism attaches to the notion of universal truths that are said to be valid for all times and places. That is typical of realism and also of much liberal idealism. Pouring cold water on academic or scientific pretensions can be a good thing.

But there is also a negative side. Why should we accept the analysis of the postmodernists if theory is always biased in some way? Why should the deconstruction be believed any more than the original construction? If every account of the social world is arbitrary and biased, then postmodernism cannot be spared: its critique can be turned upon itself. Postmodernist Richard Ashley says there is no 'positionality'—i.e. there are no stable platforms or certitudes—upon which social speech, writing, and action can be based. Yet, ironically, what makes postmodernism intelligible, including the work of Ashley, is its conformity to the basic conventions of intellectual and academic inquiry which are the foundations of all knowledge, including social knowledge. His own writing conforms to the conventions of English grammar and vocabulary, and no doubt he lives his own life as we live our lives within the compass of interpersonal standards of time, space, etc., which are marked and measured by calendars, clocks, miles, kilometers, etc. There are similar conventions of international law, politics, and economics. These measures and standards are some of the most fundamental elements of the modern world.

A more worrying problem is that postmodernism can deteriorate into nihilism—i.e. negativism for its own sake. Criticism can be made merely for the sake of criticism. Narratives can be taken apart with nothing to take their place. Ultimately, postmodernists can become estranged from the social and political world that they seek to understand. A world exclusively of contingency and



chance (Ashley 1996), rather than choice and reason, may cease to be either intelligible or meaningful. In short, there is something about postmodernism which may appeal to nihilists. But nihilism cannot provide any foundations of knowledge because it rejects the possibility and the value of knowledge.

There is a moderate postmodernism that is premised on the notion that our ideas and theories about the world always contain elements of both subjectivity and objectivity. The subjective element is tied to our adherence to different values and concepts and the inescapable fact that each and every one of us looks out upon the world from his or her own personal standpoint. The objective element is tied to the fact that we can actually agree about very substantial insights about what the real world is like. We speak the same language. We calculate in the same units of weights and measures. All that is solid does not melt into air. At the core of this middle ground is the notion of intersubjectively transmissible knowledge (Brecht 1963: 113–16). Such knowledge is bound by standards of documentation and clarity of exposition; put differently, such knowledge is compelled to demonstrate that it is not the result of wishful thinking, guesswork or fantasy; it must contain more than purely subjective valuations. Moderate postmodernism approaches the position of the constructivists, which is based on the concept of intersubjectivity.

---

## Constructivism

The focus of constructivism is on human awareness or consciousness and its place in world affairs. Constructivists, like critical theorists and postmodernists, argue that there is no external, objective social reality as such. The social and political world is not a physical entity or material object that is outside human consciousness. The international system is not something ‘out there’ like the solar system. It does not exist on its own. It exists only as inter-subjective awareness among people. It is a human invention or creation not of a physical or material kind but of a purely intellectual and ideational kind. It is a set of ideas, a body of thought, a system of norms, which has been arranged by certain people at a particular time and place. If the thoughts and ideas that enter into the existence of international relations change, then the system itself will change as well. That is because the system consists in thought and ideas. The inter-subjective character of international relations lends itself to study by methods which are ‘scientific’ in the historical and sociological sense, although not in the strictly positivist meaning of the word. Constructivism, in that sense, is a rejection of positivist IR theory. But it is not a rejection of ‘social’ science as such.

Constructivism is sometimes regarded as a new approach. But it is in fact an old methodology that can be traced back at least to the eighteenth-century



writings of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (Pompa 1982). According to Vico, the natural world is made by God, but the historical world is made by Man (Pompa 1982: 26). History is not some kind of unfolding or evolving process that is external to human affairs. Men and women make their own history. They also make states which are historical constructs. States are artificial creations and the state system is artificial too. That, too, is an old idea in the history of political thought. Leading IR constructivist theorists include Peter Katzenstein (1996), Friedrich Kratochwil (1989), Nicholas Onuf (1989), and Alexander Wendt (1992). We shall address three aspects of the constructivist approach to IR: its philosophical assumptions, its research emphases, and its response to positivism, particularly neorealism.

Constructivism is an approach to IR that postulates the following: (i) Human relations, including international relations, consist essentially of thoughts and ideas and not of material conditions or forces. (ii) The core ideational element upon which constructivists focus are intersubjective beliefs (ideas, conceptions, assumptions, etc.) that are widely shared among people. (iii) Those shared beliefs compose and express the interests and identities of people: e.g. the way people conceive of themselves in their relations with others. (iv) Constructivists focus on the ways those relations are formed and expressed: e.g. by means of collective social institutions, such as state sovereignty, 'which have no material reality but exist only because people collectively believe they exist and act accordingly' (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 392). Each of these elements of constructivist philosophy can be amplified.

Human relations, including international relations, consist of thought and ideas and not essentially of material conditions or forces. This is the philosophical idealist element of constructivism which contrasts with the materialist philosophy of most social science positivism. According to constructivist philosophy, the social world is not a given: it is not something 'out there' that exists independent of the thoughts and ideas of the people involved in it. It is not an external reality whose laws can be discovered by scientific research and explained by scientific theory as behavioralists and positivists argue. The social and political world is not part of nature. There are no natural laws of society or economics or politics. History is not an evolving external process that is independent of human thought and ideas. That means that sociology or economics or political science or the study of history cannot be objective 'sciences' in the strict positivist sense of the word.

Everything involved in the social world of men and women is made by them. The fact that they made it is what makes it intelligible to them. The social world is a world of human consciousness: of thoughts and beliefs, of ideas and concepts, of languages and discourses, of signs, signals, and understandings among human beings, especially groups of human beings, such as states and nations. The social world is an inter-subjective domain: it is meaningful to the people who made it and live in it, and who understand it precisely because they made it and they are at home in it. The social world is in part constructed of physical entities. But it is





the ideas and beliefs behind those entities which are most important: what those entities signify in the minds of people. The international system of security and defense, for example, consists of territories, populations, weapons, and other physical assets. But it is the ideas and understandings according to which those assets are conceived, organized, and used—e.g. in alliances, armed forces, etc.—that is most important. The physical element is there. But that element is secondary to the intellectual element which infuses it, plans it, organizes it, and guides it. The thought that is involved in international security is more important, far more important, than the physical assets that are involved because those assets have no meaning without the intellectual component: they are mere things in themselves.

### Box 9.3 **Wendt's constructivist conception of social structures**

Social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices. First, social structures are defined, in part, by shared understandings, expectations, or knowledge. These constitute the actors in a situation and the nature of their relationships, whether cooperative or conflictual. A *security dilemma*, for example, is a social structure composed of intersubjective understandings in which states are so distrustful that they make worst-case assumptions about each other's intentions, and as a result define their interests in self-help terms. A *security community* is a different social structure, one composed of shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war. This dependence of social structure on ideas is the sense in which constructivism has an idealist (or 'idea-ist') view of structure.

Wendt (1992: 73)

The core ideational element upon which constructivists focus is inter-subjective beliefs (and ideas, conceptions, and assumptions) that are widely shared among people. In IR such beliefs include a group of people's notion of themselves as a nation or nationality, their conception of their country as a state, their notion of their state as independent or sovereign, their idea of themselves as different from other peoples in cultural or religious or historical terms, their sense of their history and traditions, their political convictions and prejudices and ideologies, their political institutions, and much else. These beliefs must be widely shared to matter. The existential reality of a nation is marked by evidence of a widely held belief among a population that they collectively compose a national community with its own distinctive identity. If such beliefs are only held by a few people they cannot claim to be sufficiently general to be of real social and political significance. For example, in many parts of Eastern Europe before the nineteenth century only small circles of intellectuals had a sense of national identity: e.g. being Serbian or Croatian or Romanian or Bulgarian, etc. The spread of that idea among the general population in the nineteenth century, along with the spread of education



and literacy, was the process by which such nations were created. Nations, nationalisms, and national identities are social constructions of time and place.

As the foregoing implies, it is not only the sharing of beliefs and ideas but also the limits to such sharing that is important. Inter-subjectivity only goes so far. Shared beliefs constitute and express the interests and identities of certain people: the way that a group of people conceive of themselves and think of themselves in their relations with other groups of people who are deemed to be in some significant ways different from themselves. What it means to be an American, a citizen of a sovereign nation that is Christian and specifically Protestant in origin, an English-speaking nation, a nation based on a republican and liberal ideology, with a distinctive immigrant tradition, and a strong positive inclination to support capitalism and to reject statism and big government—that is not what it means to be a Mexican or a Russian or even a Briton. In short, national identities are constituted by distinctive inter-subjective beliefs which only extend a certain distance in space and time and no farther. While identities can overlap they are at some point incommensurate. If Americans decided to impose their core beliefs on Mexicans they would discover and probably encounter an intellectual resistance and rejection based on counterpart but significantly different Mexican beliefs.

Constructivists focus not only on differences among people and the ways that people institutionalize and regulate their differences but also on the ways that people manage to create and sustain social, economic, and political relations in spite of their social differences. Different groups of people have managed to do that by means of sovereignty, human rights, international commerce, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, and various other social institutions. At base, these joint arrangements are expressions or applications of ideas and beliefs that different peoples around the world hold in common and through which they are able to relate to each other and deal with each other—at least up to a point. None of that elaborate ideational framework exists on its own. All of it belongs to a world of inter-subjectivity. It has not always existed in the past. It will not always exist in the future. It is a product of human intellect at a certain period of world history. It is specifically historical.

Constructivism is an empirical approach to the study of international relations which displays some distinctive research interests and approaches. If the social and political world consists, at base, of shared beliefs, how does that affect the way we should account for important international events and episodes? Constructivists, as a rule, cannot subscribe to positivist conceptions of causality. That is because the positivists do not probe the inter-subjective content of events and episodes. For example, the well-known billiard ball image of international relations is rejected by constructivists because it fails to reveal the thoughts, ideas, beliefs, etc. of the actors involved in international conflicts. Constructivists want to probe the inside of the billiard balls to arrive at a deeper understanding of such conflicts.

Conflict, for constructivists, is understood not as a collision between forces or entities (i.e. states conceived as units) but rather as a disagreement or dispute



or misunderstanding or lack of communication or some other intellectual discord or dissonance between conscious agents. Conflict is always a conflict of minds and wills of the parties involved. To correctly understand such conflict calls for an inquiry into the discourses at play in the event. That would disclose the sources and depth of the dispute and its intellectual obstacles and possibilities of resolution—in other words the sentiments and beliefs and ideas by which it is organized and expressed. A constructivist research program into an international conflict might be compared to the task of a diplomat assigned to investigate an international dispute with the aim of finding some common ground of agreement upon which a resolution of it could be based. If the diplomat fails in his efforts to mediate perhaps his autobiography may later give an account, his account, of the reasons why: the unrealistic demands, the lack of trust or good will, the obstinacy of the parties, etc. In short, the ideational basis of the dispute will be revealed and the ‘causes’ of it will be seen in the correct light: i.e. as inter-subjective discord.

In other words, constructivists are among those scholars who see research as a matter of interpretation more than explanation. They are skeptical of the possibilities of having a neutral stance towards research, which will result in objective knowledge that can be expanded as research findings accumulate. Some constructivists are more skeptical about objective knowledge than others. Constructivists who lean towards postmodernism are likely to be more skeptical, and those who lean towards a social science research agenda are less skeptical of objective knowledge. Some constructivists, perhaps those who formerly were positivist social scientists, speak of ‘mechanisms and processes of social construction’ (Finnemore and Sikkink 2001: 403). The language of ‘mechanisms’ and ‘processes’ inclines scholars to view the international world as an external reality that can be explained by knowing its own social forces and laws. Other constructivists who emphasize discourse and communication are inclined to understand the business of research as that of entering into the world of the people under study, scrutinizing their reasoning and language, exposing their assumptions and beliefs and showing how that conditions and shapes their behavior.

Some examples of the constructivist approach to social research include the following (drawn from Katzenstein 1996). In the study of national security, for example, constructivists pay careful attention to the influence and effects, we might say the conditioning, of culture and identity on security policies and actions. In the study of deterrence, they pay careful attention to the role of norms, particularly ‘prohibitory norms’ and taboos that condition the limited use of nuclear and chemical weapons. In the study of armed intervention, they pay careful attention to normative and institutional arrangements that encourage and inhibit, permit and prohibit, such international actions. As a rule, constructivists are not satisfied with the explanations of neorealists that tend to disregard such conditioning elements and focus, instead, on military power or material interests alone. Constructivists say that international relations are more complex, and they pay particular attention to the cultural-institutional-normative aspects of that



greater complexity. All those factors that capture the attention of constructivist researchers noted above—i.e. culture, identity, norms, institutions—are instances of an inter-subjective world that is created rather than an objective world that is discovered.

In an oft-repeated phrase, Alexander Wendt (1992) captured the core of IR constructivism in the following remark: ‘anarchy is what states make of it’. His work is distinctive in specifically arguing, at great length, against the positivist theory of neorealism and particularly that of Kenneth Waltz. There is no objective international world apart from the practices and institutions that states arrange among themselves. In making that statement Wendt argues that anarchy is not some kind of external given which dictates a logic of analysis based on neorealism. Here Wendt is disagreeing fundamentally with the central thesis of neorealism: ‘Self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy’ (Wendt 1992: 395). That means that there is no inevitable ‘security dilemma’ between sovereign states because any situation that states find themselves in is a situation that they themselves have created. They are not prisoners of the anarchical structure of the state system. Not only is there no state system independent of the practices of states, but there also are no states independent of the rules by which states recognize each other. States construct one another in their relations and in so doing they also construct the international anarchy that defines their relations. In short, the political world, including international relations, is created and constituted entirely by people. Nothing social exists outside of that human activity or independent of it.

There are some important implications that follow from constructivist IR methodology. If ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ there is nothing inevitable or unchangeable about world politics. Nothing is given or certain. Everything is inter-subjective and thus uncertain. Everything is in flux. The existing system is a creation of states and if states change their conceptions of who they are, what their interests are, what they want, etc. then the situation will change accordingly because the situation is nothing more or less than what they decide and do. States could decide, for example, to reduce their sovereignty or even to give up their sovereignty. If that happened there would no longer be an international anarchy as we know it. Instead, there would be a brave new, non-anarchical world—perhaps one in which states were subordinate to a world government. Perhaps they would construct a world in which they were all subject to ‘the common good’ (Onuf 1995). That would be a world beyond sovereignty and in some fundamental respects beyond modernity too. Moreover, if everything is uncertain and in flux it would be impossible to predict what international relations will be like tomorrow. Among other things, that means that a predictive and explanatory social science of IR could not be achieved.

That is not a conclusion that many constructivists are satisfied with. They see themselves as involved in the ambitious project of building a social science of IR. They do not see themselves as accepting the more modest goals of a humanistic IR



comparable to that espoused by the classical approach. So constructivists usually want to remain within the behavioural revolution while not accepting the notion of an external, objective reality. What they accept is an inter-subjective reality: i.e. the claim that between human agents, including those agents who act on behalf of states, there can be mutual understanding, shared ideas, joint practices, and common rules that acquire a social standing that is independent of any of those agents. Collectively the rules and practices constitute an inter-subjective political reality. A social science of IR can be built upon the constructivist analysis of that inter-subjective reality. That is the goal of most constructivists.

The distance between constructivism and positivism in that respect is not as great as it might seem. That is clear from the following remark of one of the most prominent behavioralists in political science: 'The meanings people give to their political behavior are critical data for scientific observation precisely because, from the standpoint of the behavioral persuasion, there is no "behavior as such" in a purely physical or mechanistic sense. Observation is a communicative act in which both the observer and observed are mutually implicated . . . The observer's questions and the observed's responses must be mutually meaningful' (Eulau 1963). Eulau is saying that the external world of human behaviour is a social world: a sphere of human communication. Social scientists can only access that world in the first instance by communicating with it and thus by understanding it. The observer's hypotheses and theories, however, are independent and objective. They occupy a separate scientific realm of explanation. The methodological problem with constructivism emerges at this point: it has a split personality. In emphasizing inter-subjectivity it is post-positivist, but in emphasizing scientific explanation it is positivist. This issue will be explored further in the concluding section of the chapter.

---

## Normative Theory

Normative IR theory is not really post-positivist; it is pre-positivist. Indeed, it is both modern and pre-modern: it is part of the history of political thought and it can be traced back as far as European antiquity, for example in the writings of Thucydides. Three leading contemporary IR normative theorists are Chris Brown (1992), Mervyn Frost (1996), Terry Nardin (1983), and Brown, Nardin, and Rengger (2002). Chris Brown (1992: 3) defines the approach succinctly: 'by normative international relations theory is meant that body of work which addresses the moral dimension of international relations and the wider questions of meaning and interpretation generated by the discipline. At its most basic it addresses the ethical nature of the relations between communities/states'. International politics involves some of the most fundamental normative issues that human beings ever



encounter in their lives: issues of order, of war and peace, of justice and injustice, of human rights, of intervention in state sovereignty, of environmental protection, and similar ethical questions of a fundamental kind.

In many respects, though not all respects, normative theory is synonymous with the classical approach, except that it reaches farther into political theory and moral philosophy and it draws heavily on recent developments in these fields. 'Normative theory' is really another name for the political theory or the moral philosophy of international relations.

Most positivist IR scholars draw a basic distinction between empirical theory and normative theory. They see the latter as exclusively *prescriptive*. In other words, (positivist) empirical theory is a theory of facts, of what actually happens, whereas normative theory is a theory of values, of an ideal world that does not exist as such. Most normative theorists would reject that distinction as misleading. As normative theorists see it, normative theory is both about facts and values. The 'facts' of normative theory are the rules, institutions, and practices which have normative content; for example, rules about the conduct of war, or about human rights. Normative theory is primarily concerned with giving a theoretical account of those normative rules, institutions, and practices. It seeks to make explicit the normative issues, conflicts, dilemmas involved in the conduct of foreign policy and other international activities. In other words, normative theory is empirical in its own way. Furthermore, normative theorists point out that so-called non-normative theories are also value-based. They merely fail to be explicit about their normative premises and values.

Normative theorists attempt to clarify the basic moral issues of international relations. One noteworthy attempt is that of Chris Brown (1992) who summarizes the main normative controversies of world politics in terms of two rival moral outlooks which are captured by the terms 'cosmopolitanism' and 'communitarianism' (these normative problems are also taken up by International Society theory, see Chapter 5). Cosmopolitanism is a normative doctrine which focuses on individual human beings and on the whole community of humankind as the basic right- and duty-bearing units of world politics. Communitarianism is a contrasting normative doctrine which focuses on political communities, particularly sovereign states, as the fundamental normative units of world politics whose rights, duties, and legitimate interests have priority over all other normative categories and agencies. For Brown, a big part of contemporary normative theory is concerned with assessing these rival moral doctrines. One of the tasks of normative theory is determining which of these two important doctrines has priority and which ought to have priority. The questions are complex: Which rights do states have? Should they be allowed to possess weapons of mass destruction which are a threat to mankind? Which rights do individuals have? Do individual rights come before state rights? Are individuals formed by states—i.e. subjects, citizens? There are no simple answers. Many theorists are content to live with the proposition that the normative conflict between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism cannot be



resolved once and for all; it can merely be understood and hopefully managed in an enlightened fashion.

Brown presents what is perhaps the most widespread view of normative theory in IR at the present time. A less widespread but in some ways more fundamental attempt to interrogate the morality of individuals and the morality of political communities is set forth by Mervyn Frost (1996):

. . . normative theory should be directed in the first place to the question: What should I, as citizen (or we the government, or we the nation, or we the community of states) do? But finding an answer to this kind of question usually depends on finding an answer to a prior question which is quite different. This prior and more important question is about the ethical standing of the institutions within which we find ourselves (and the ethical standing of the institutions within which others find themselves).

According to Frost, if we find that states are more important than other institutions, we might conclude that in certain circumstances it is a duty of citizens to risk their lives to safeguard their state. The aim of normative theory is to sort out 'the ethical standing of institutions' in relation to each other (Frost 1996: 4).

A third approach to normative theory is linked to the international society school (see Chapter 5) and focuses on the ethics of international law (Nardin 1983) and the ethics of statecraft (Jackson 1995; 1996). This approach addresses questions such as the following: Which groups of people qualify for recognition as sovereign states? Are the international responsibilities of all states the same or do some states have special responsibilities? Are there any conceivable circumstances under which a sovereign state's right of self-defense could be legitimately infringed? Is there any valid normative basis for denying admission to the nuclear club? Is international society responsible for providing personal security or is that an exclusively domestic responsibility of sovereign states? Is international society responsible for governing independent countries whose governments have for all intents and purposes ceased to exist? Must 'ethnic cleansing' always be condemned? Does the goal of defending or developing democracy justify military intervention and occupation of a country? Can international society reasonably expect national leaders to put their own soldiers in danger to protect human rights in foreign countries? Is there any normative basis for justifying the use of force to change international boundaries? Are there any conceivable circumstances under which global environmental protection could justifiably interfere with state sovereignty?

This third approach attempts to *theorize* the normative *practices* of states and state leaders. It emphasizes that international ethics at its core concerns the moral choices of statespeople. Thus the answers to international normative questions, such as those listed above, are provided in the first instance by the practitioners involved. The main task of normative theory is to interrogate those answers with the aim of spelling out, clarifying, and scrutinizing the framework of justification disclosed by them. This approach emphasizes that international ethics, just like



ethics in any other sphere of human activity, develops within the activity itself—in this case the activity of statecraft—and is adapted to the characteristics and limits of human conduct in that sphere. According to this third approach to normative theory, scholars must assess the conduct of statespeople by the standards which are generally accepted by those same statespeople. Otherwise theory not only misjudges practices and loses touch with reality but it also misunderstands and misrepresents the moral world in which state leaders must operate and must be judged.

Normative theory rejects positivism as a flawed methodology that cannot address what normative theorists consider to be the most fundamental issues of international relations: moral decisions and dilemmas. Yet normative theory also parts company with those post-positivists who repudiate the classical tradition of political theory and moral philosophy. However, that also means that normative theory, like constructivism, is exposed to attack from both sides: it is exposed to the positivist critique that it fails to explain anything in scientific terms; and it is exposed to the postmodernist critique that it is dealing in the myths, delusions, and deceptions of supposedly antiquated classical values. Normative theorists and constructivists share a common approach in focusing on inter-subjective ideas and beliefs. But most constructivists are hoping to create a proper social science whereas most normative theorists are content to preserve, transmit, and augment the classical political theory of international relations (Brown, Nardin, and Rengger 2002).

---

## Explaining IR Versus Understanding IR

The basic methodological divide in IR concerns the nature of the social world (ontology) and the relation of our knowledge to that world (epistemology). The ontology issue is raised by the following question: is there an *objective* reality 'out there' or is the world one of experience only: i.e. a *subjective* creation of people (Oakeshott 1933)? The extreme objectivist position is purely naturalist and materialist; i.e. international relations is basically a thing, an object, out there. The extreme subjectivist position is purely idealist; i.e. international relations is basically an idea or concept that people share about how they should organize themselves and relate to each other politically: it is constituted exclusively by language, ideas, and concepts.

The epistemology issue is raised by the following question: in what way can we obtain knowledge about the world? At one extreme is the notion of scientifically *explaining* the world. The task is to build a valid social science on a foundation of verifiable empirical propositions. At the other extreme is the notion of *understanding* the world. This latter task is to comprehend and interpret the substantive



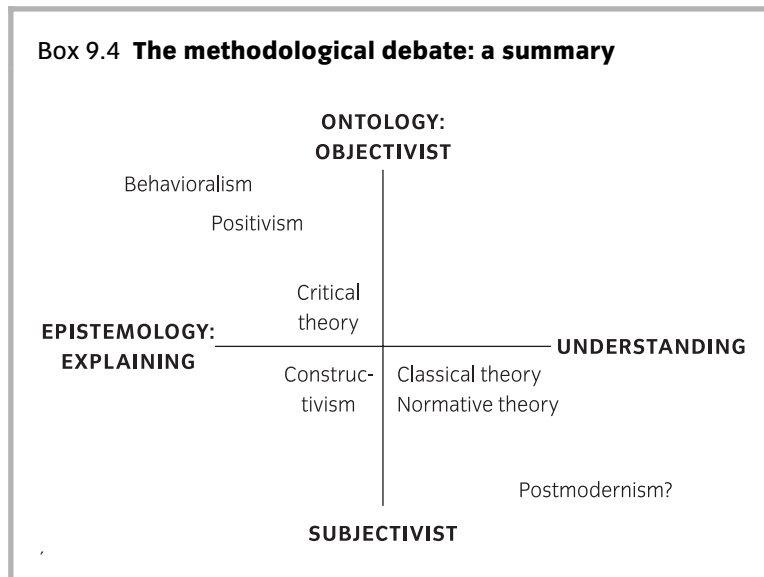


topic under study. According to this view, historical, legal, or moral problems of world politics cannot be translated into the terms of science without misunderstanding them.

We have indicated several times above that there is both a 'confrontationist' and a 'cooperative' view of the ontological divide between objectivism and subjectivism and the epistemological divide between explaining and understanding. One extreme position is taken up by behavioralists and some positivists who strive for scientific theory based on a view of the world as an objective reality. Another extreme position is taken up by postmodernists for whom reality is a subjective creation of people. As regards epistemology, some postmodernists find that a satisfactory interpretation of the social and political world is possible, but other postmodernists reject even that (see the remarks above, about a nihilistic tendency in postmodernism). According to some scholars, only the extreme positions are intellectually coherent. A choice has to be made between 'positivist' and 'post-positivist' methodology. The two cannot be combined, because they have 'mutually exclusive assumptions' (Smith 1997: 186) about the world of international relations.

However, other IR scholars strive to avoid the extreme positions in the methodological debate. They seek out a middle ground which avoids the stark choice between either objectivism or subjectivism, either pure explaining or pure understanding. The desire for the middle ground is contained already in Max Weber's (1964: 88) definition of 'sociology' as 'a science which attempts the *interpretive* understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal *explanations* of its course and effects'. Weber is saying that it is true that scholars must understand the world in order to carry out their research into social phenomena. He is also saying, however, that that does not prevent scholars from proceeding to frame hypotheses to test empirical theories that seek to explain social phenomena. On that view (Sørensen 1998), IR is not compelled to a cruel choice between extreme versions of positivism or post-positivism. It can proceed on a methodological middle ground between subjectivism and objectivism, and between explaining and understanding. In other words, there is not an insurmountable gulf between positivist and post-positivist methodological extremes. Instead of an 'either/or' it is a 'both/and': rather than having to choose between extremes on the two dimensions we have discussed (subjectivity versus objectivity and explaining versus understanding) it is a question of finding a place somewhere on the continuum between the extremes.

Box 9.4 gives an indication of the appropriate position of the different methodological approaches on the two dimensions. The question mark behind postmodernism reflects our doubts as regards the position of that approach on the explaining/understanding axis. Postmodernism is 'understanding' in its critique of established theories, but it also contains a nihilistic tendency, as noted above. That creates doubts as to where the approach belongs on this axis. Nihilism is neither explaining nor understanding but, rather, is a different category. Some



methodological approaches—e.g. constructivism and critical theory as well as the classical and normative approaches—are oriented more towards the middle ground than the extremes. It is noteworthy that some of the major debates within the established theoretical traditions in IR concern precisely this issue of the proper combination. The issue is at the heart of debates between, e.g. classical realists and neorealists (see Chapter 3); between different currents of the International Society School (see Chapter 5); and between various schools within liberalism (see Chapter 4). This chapter has shown how the debate continues within and between the different post-positivist approaches. However we choose to view this question, there can be little doubt but that it is the most fundamental methodological issue in IR.

### KEY POINTS

- Post-positivist approaches include: critical theory; postmodernism; constructivism; and normative theory. Critical theory is a development of Marxist thought; it seeks to unmask the global domination of the rich North over the poor South. Critical theory views knowledge as inherently political; social scientists and social science are instruments of power.
- Postmodernism disputes the notions of reality, of truth, of the idea that there is or can be an ever-expanding knowledge of the human world. Narratives, including metanarratives, are



always constructed by a theorist and they are thus always contaminated by his or her standpoint and prejudices. Narratives can thus be deconstructed: i.e. taken apart to disclose their arbitrary elements and biased intentions.

- Constructivists agree with positivists that we can accumulate valid knowledge about the world. But in contrast to positivists, constructivists emphasize the role of ideas, of shared knowledge of the social world. States construct one another in their relations and in so doing they also construct the international anarchy that defines their relations. Anarchy is not a natural condition; anarchy is what states make of it.
- Normative theory attempts to clarify the basic moral issues of international relations. The main normative outlooks are cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. The questions raised by these outlooks are complex, e.g.: Which rights do states have? Which rights do individuals have? Do individual rights come before state rights? International ethics also concern the moral choices of statespeople.
- The two basic methodological dimensions of IR are the nature of the social world (ontology) and the relation of our knowledge to that world (epistemology). The ontological dimension concerns the nature of social reality: is it an objective reality 'out there' or is it a subjective creation of people? The epistemological dimension concerns the ways in which we can obtain knowledge about the world. Can we scientifically explain it or must we instead interpretively understand it?
- There is a 'confrontationist' and a 'cooperative' view of the methodological divide. The confrontationist view sees an insurmountable gulf between positivist and post-positivist methodology. The cooperative view sees a middle ground between different approaches.

.....

## QUESTIONS

- Summarize the main issues in the debate between positivists and post-positivists. Which side in the debate do you favor? Why?
- Identify at least two major post-positivist approaches. What are the most significant methodological similarities and differences between the approaches identified?
- What is the better way of looking at IR methodologies: as categorically different or as conceptually overlapping?
- Outline the methodological outlooks of the classical approach and normative theory. Are there any significant differences between them or are they basically the same approach?



For additional material and resources see the companion web site at:

[www.oup.co.uk/best.textbooks/politics/jacksonsorensen2e/](http://www.oup.co.uk/best.textbooks/politics/jacksonsorensen2e/)

## GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

**Brown, C., Nardin, T., and Rengger, N.** (eds.) (2002). 'Introduction', *International Relations in Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Nicholson, M.** (1996). 'The continued significance of positivism?' in S. Smith, K. Booth, and M. Zalewski (1996). *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 128–49.

**Smith, S.** (1997). 'New Approaches to International Theory,' in J. Baylis and S. Smith (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 165–90.

**Smith, S., Booth, K., and Zalewski, M.** (eds.) (1996). *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Wendt, A.** (1992), 'Anarchy is what states make of it,' *International Organization* 46: 394–419.

## WEB LINKS

<http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/>

Critical Theory web site for those interested in the Critical Theory project. A collection of articles, excerpts, and chapters from many contemporary writers, based on Frankfurt School thought. Additional submissions from graduate students and others, links to other web sites, and related sources.

<http://www.ukc.ac.uk/politics/publications/journals/kentpapers/webb4.html>

Keith Webb's thorough paper on postmodernist thought is entitled 'Preliminary Questions about Postmodernism'. Hosted by the University of Kent.

<http://home.pi.be/~lazone/>

Comprehensive collection of links to online papers related to constructivism as well as links to other constructivist web resources. Hosted by Planet Internet.

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/ies/onlinepapers/poe13-01.pdf>

Applies Normative Theory to an analysis of the legitimacy of the European Union. The paper is written by Richard Bellamy and Dario Castiglione and is hosted by Queen's University Belfast.