

# Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism: born of the same approach?

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**Neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism are simply manifestations of the same approach. Discuss.**

### Introduction

The debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism has dominated International Relations (IR) theory, particularly in the United States. The 'neo-neo' debate has brought much contention between the scholars of IR, equally the two schools of thought have been considered by many to be remarkably similar. In the first part of this essay I will outline the framework of the 'neo-neo' debate, discussing the fundamental points of contention between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. Two prominent Institutionalists, Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin (1995), have suggested that "for better or for worse institutional theory is a half-sibling of neo-realism" (Keohane & Martin, 1995, cited in Lamy, 2005, p.215). The study of IR has experienced dramatic change as the foundational epistemology has been criticized by post-modern theorists who attack the underlying assumptions of positivism. As post-positivists are simply united through their opposition to the positivist movement, it is not a clean two-sided debate.

In the second part of this essay I will highlight the fundamental similarities that bring neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism under the theoretical umbrella of rationalism, whilst comparing the rationalist position to the recently surfaced reflectivism. As the debate has evolved the common assumptions of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism have become increasingly obvious. In the final part of the essay I will analyse the similar assumptions of the international system held by rationalist theories, with particularly close attention paid to 'anarchy', 'self-help', and 'collective security'. To some extent the 'Great Debate' was an artificially constructed 'debate', invented for "specific presentational purposes, teaching and self-reflection of the discipline" (Waever, 1996, p.161). Moreover, the debate has highlighted the comparable paradigm positions of neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism, giving rise to a 'neo-neo synthesis' (Waever, 1996, p. 163), further consolidating the idea that the two approaches are simply manifestation of the same approach.

### The 'neo-neo' debate

The debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism has dominated IR debate for decades. The two schools of thought have jostled over views of the international system in an attempt to define the world of international politics. These two paradigms have been important to defining policymaking and the research within international relations (Lamy, 2005, p.207). The debate is characterized by their disagreement over specific issues such as: the nature and consequences of anarchy, international cooperation, relative versus absolute gains, intentions versus capabilities, institutions and regimes, and priority of state goals.

Kenneth Waltz is one of many scholars responsible for expanding the ideas of traditional realists such as Hans Morganthau, who looked at the actions and interactions between states in the system, in an attempt to explain international politics (Lamy, 2005, p.208). Neorealism looks to separate the internal factors of the international political systems from the external. This separation isolates one realm from another, allowing theorists to deal with

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each at an intellectual level. Neorealists focus on the structure of the system, analysing the variations, how they affect the interacting units, and the outcomes they produce (Waltz, 1990, p.29).

Waltz (1986) claims that the anarchic international system was a force that fashioned the states which constitute the system. The structure of the anarchic system compelled states to worry about security and take adequate measures to achieve it. The preferences of states could not explain international outcomes, rather, Waltz argued that "state behaviour varies more with differences of power than with difference in ideology, in internal structure of property relations or in governmental form" (Waltz, 1986, cited in Walt, 2002, p.202-203).

Where neorealists were seen to focus on security measures, neoliberal institutionalists are believed to have placed greater emphasis upon environmental and economic issues, with a specific focus on the latter. Keohane and Nye (2001) argue that interdependence, particularly economic interdependence, is now an important feature of world politics. Furthermore, Keohane and Nye argue that states are dominant actors in international relations; equally there is an assumption that hierarchy exists within international politics and force can be used as an effective instrument of policy. Globalization represents an increase in interconnectedness and linkages; this mutual interdependence between states positively affects behavioural patterns and changes the way states cooperate (Keohane and Nye, 2001).

The realist view on international cooperation is rather more pessimistic. As man by nature has a restless desire for power and self-interest (Keohane, 1986, p.211-212), cooperation becomes difficult to achieve as this strive for power is likely to upset the status-quo. According to Mearsheimer (1995), the two main obstructions to international cooperation are relative gains considerations and cheating, both of which stem from the logic of anarchy (Mearsheimer, 1995, p.12). Grieco (1988) argues that realists find that states are positional, not atomistic, in character; therefore as well as being anxious about cheating, states are primarily concerned with how their partners might benefit from any cooperative arrangements (Grieco, 1988, p.487). Since international relations are a zero-sum game, states compete with each other to ensure their own benefits outweigh that of others.

For realists, survival within the anarchic international system is paramount. The intentions of states are unknown and subsequently state actors are cautious about the gains of others when cooperating; a friend may gain from cooperation one day and use it as a threat the next. Waltz (1979) argues, under global anarchy, "when faced with the possibility of cooperating for mutual gains, states that feel insecure must ask how the gain will be divided. They are compelled to ask not 'Will both of us gain?' but 'Who will gain more?'" (Waltz, 1979, cited in Kegley, 2008, p.30). For neorealists, balance of power is essential to understanding world politics; when states have such concerns about the balance of power cooperation is much more difficult to achieve.

Neoliberals show more concern as to how a state benefits overall, as opposed to how a state will benefit in comparison to others; it is suggested that policy makers will consider absolute gains to be made from an agreement, including potential longer-term gains. Neoliberals argue that to focus on relative gains is misguided as economic interdependence ensures that neither side can effectively exploit the economic relationship and take advantage of the other politically. Mastanduno (1991) suggests that relative gains can be destructive as they are conducive to the twin evils of protectionism and nationalism (Mastanduno, 1991, p. 76). To focus on distribution of benefit could affect the total benefit overall.

Neoliberal institutionalists agree that states act in their own interests, yet hold a much more optimistic view on cooperation. Keohane (1984) recognized that cooperation is not an easy feat and can lead to tension, but states could potentially benefit from cooperative strategies (Keohane, 1984). Duncan Snidal (1991) believes that if absolute gains from cooperation are considerable then relative gains are likely to have minimal effect on cooperation (Snidal, 1991, cited in Keohane & Martin, 1995, p.44). Like realists, institutionalists are concerned about cheating, but unlike neorealists, they place great faith in institutions themselves. Institutions provide a coordinating mechanism to help states capture potential gains from cooperation; this "constructed focal point" increases the opportunity of cooperative outcomes (Keohane & Martin, 1995, p.45). Furthermore, institutions provide an arbitrary body that is able to provide states with information preventing states from cheating. As explained in the game theory, more specifically Prisoners dilemma, states seek to maximize individual pay-offs, and so institutions offer a platform

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through which greater coordination and cooperation can be executed, subsequently benefitting both parties.

In Mearsheimer's article *The False Promise of International Institutions*, he purports that institutions reflect the distribution of power in the world; moreover, institutions have little influence on state behavior and offer diminutive opportunity for holding stability in a post Cold War period. Where neoliberals believe there to be strong correlation between institutions, economic cooperation and peace, neorealists doubt the link made between cooperation and stability as neoliberal theorists avoid military issues (Mearsheimer, 1995).

Mearsheimer (1995) argues that absolute gains logic can only apply to the economic realm, whereas relative gains apply to the security realm. Neoliberal institutionalists attempt to divide a line between the economic and security realm, yet there is correlation between economic might and military might. If neoliberals accept this realist claim that states act in accordance to self interest in an anarchic system where military powers matter, then according to Mearsheimer they must deal with the issue of relative gains (Mearsheimer, 1995, p.20). Keohane and Martin (1995) recognize that there is not a clear analytical line between security and economic issues, but institutionalist theory has placed an importance on the role of institutions providing information removing the problem of uncertainty (Keohane & Martin, 1995, p.43).

Driven by survival, neorealists are sensitive to any erosion of their relative capabilities as these factors are the basis for security and independence (Grieco, 1988, p.498). Similarly, Krasner (1991) criticizes the neoliberal school of thought for placing too much emphasis upon intentions, interests, and information, paying little attention to the distribution of capabilities (Krasner, 1991, cited in Baldwin, 1993, p.7) Again institutionalists envisage the issue of capabilities being amended through security institutions signaling governments' intentions by providing others with adequate information. Institutions reflect advancing principles and norms of community standards lowering the costs of multilateral enforcement strategies (Kay, 2011, p.60).

The 'inter-paradigm' debate between neorealists and neoliberal institutionalists lasted for decades as scholars continued to pick flaws in position of the opposing approach, in an attempt highlight problems with the causal logic. It was not until the emergence of alternative approaches to international theory did the axis of the debate change.

### **Positivism/rationalism & post-positivism /reflectivism**

The 'inter-paradigm' debate that has taken place within IR fails to illuminate the ongoing controversies in the discipline; the 'neo-neo' debate is not the story today (Waever, 1996, p.149). The debate between neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism has been sidelined as a thing of the past, as these two theoretical approaches essentially share similar views of the social world. The fourth debate between positivism and post-positivism, or rationalism and reflectivism, emerged in the late 1980s. This emerging debate is centred as much on epistemological and ontological basis of IR as on theoretical claims and methodologies (Doherty, 2000, p.235). In the following section I plan to illustrate how neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism fall under the umbrella of positivism or rationalism, and how they differ to the reflectivist approach.

According to Waever (1996) both neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism underwent a "self-limiting redefinition towards an anti-metaphysical, theoretical minimalism, and they became increasingly compatible"; a dominant neo-neo synthesis became the research programme in the 1980's (Waever, 1996, p.163). In a presidential address for ISA in 1988, Keohane clearly brought both neorealism and neoliberalism under the umbrella of rationalism. The 'inter-paradigm' debate had been diluted as the two approaches share a 'rationalist' research programme, a conception for science, a similar approach anarchy and willingness to assess the evolution of co-operation and whether institutions matter (Waever, 1996, p.163). This 'redefinition' ultimately changes the axis of debate within study of IR.

Neoliberals and neorealists are two views of the same approach. Both assume similar positions regarding the international system: states are main actors, they act rationally, and international anarchy shapes their behaviour. Most notably, neorealism and neoliberal share similar methodology, epistemology and ontology. The methods by which neorealists and neoliberals study the world are analogous. Crucially, they agree that the acquisition of knowledge is based on the liberal notion of power and politics, which under-problematizes the use of empirical

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material (Smith, 1997). Simon (1985) argues that rationalism is contextual, much depending of the presuppositions before the analysis. The principle of rationality is to formulate hypotheses about the real human behaviour, but must have combined additional assumptions about the structure of utility functions and the formation of expectations (Simon, 1985, cited in Keohane, 1988, p.381).

Positivism is the epistemological approach taken by rationalist theorists. Positivism holds onto the idea that there international system is essentially the same as the systems in the natural world. The scientific approach of positivism views both the social and political world as having patterns and regularities, a type of naturalism, suggesting that observation and experience is crucial to formulating and reviewing scientific theory. Positivist IR scholars draw a basic distinction between empirical theory and normative theory, and therefore remain neutral between theories. In philosophical terms this is an objectivist position, one that recognizes that observations may be subjective, yet objective knowledge in the world is possible (Smith, 1996, p.16). Rather than spend time on debates about what the world should look like, positivists prefer to look at the way thing 'really' are (Smith, 2005).

Positivism has been a methodological commitment, tied to an empiricist epistemology, which undeniably restricts the range of permissible ontological claims (Smith, 1996, p.17). Neorealism and neoliberalism share a similar materialist ontological approach to theoretical analysis. For rationalists, reality is comprised of tangible and palpable objects; therefore the theory of knowledge is interlinked with materialism. This materialist approach reduces everything to matter and what is observable. Social processes (culture, values and norms) between state actors are an indirect function of the material dimension.

Positivism has been the dominant epistemology of IR theorists throughout history. Elias and Sutch (2007) go as far to suggest that positivists have acted as gatekeepers by setting strong parameters as to what would count as a fact in the discipline, using this to prevent non-positivist forms of knowledge from being examined (Elias & Sutch, 2007, p.14) The 'fourth debate' debate according to Lapid moved away from positivist assumptions and stimulated self-reflection and pointed towards new measures of objectivity (Waever, 1996, p. 156). Scholars of reflectivism take a more sociological approach to understanding world politics. Reflectivism has given birth to a number of adherent sub-discipline theories of IR such as feminist theory, critical theory, normative theory, historical sociology, and post-modernism. These opposing theories cannot simply be merged together as a counter to the 'neo-neo synthesis' approach as each theory differs enormously and vary as to how they construct knowledge. What unites these theoretical perspectives is how each of these one of these theories reject one or more key assumptions of the rationalist accounts, constituting the birth of post-positivism.

On the other hand reflectivists maintain an idealist approach to ontology. Rather than being concerned with materialism, they argue that the social world is constructed by the ideas and values; language, ideas and concepts are at the basis of the reflectivist approach. This subjectivist position suggests that international relations is at its most basic form an idea or concept that people share about how states should organize themselves and relate to each other politically (Jackson & Sorensen, 2007, p.300).

Unlike the mainstream theorists of IR, reflectivist theorists adopt a post-positivist epistemological approach, rejecting the idea that social sciences can adopt the empiricist observation of the natural sciences. For post-positivists reality is a subjective creation of people; reflectivist theory looks to understand political phenomena through asking relevant questions that help determine what contributes to certain outcomes within the international arena (Jackson & Sorensen, 2007, p.300). Rather than merely focussing on high politics of the state, post-positivism looks to promote a normative approach to IR and go 'beyond' the Wesphalian model, opening the debate towards issues such as poverty, disease, migration, religious and cultural pluralism, gender issues, environmentalism, human rights and humanitarian intervention (Elias & Sutch, 2007, p.14).

In a movement away from the objective, value-free, universal knowledge that characterised the rationalist and positivist movement, post-positivism looked to interpret and explain why things are the way they are, as opposed to merely describing what they were (McNabb, 2010, p.19). Cox (1981) argued that 'theory is always for someone, and for some purpose' (Cox, 1981, p.128), suggesting that the time or context play a role in developing social knowledge; therefore contrary to positivist belief, the facts that constitute this knowledge cannot be objective and must reflect

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some aspect of the value of its origin. Similarly normative theory, a sub-discipline of the reflectivist approach, takes two issues with this idea that facts are not value-laden. First, it is a very narrow definition of what politics is about, with too much focus on the politics that 'really' already exists in the social world.

The second problem is that all theories reflect the values of what the theorist chooses to focus on and explain as the 'facts', through the methods they use to study these 'facts', down to the policy prescriptions they suggest (Owens & Smith, 2005, p.279). Rationalism ignores the social processes that lead to changes in the outlook of world politics. Preferences are assumed to be fixed, which prohibits research from understanding how interests and beliefs change over time, whereas reflective theorists look to understand how politics has changed based on post hoc observation of values or ideology.

Reflectivism posits an emphasis upon interpretation, or "inter-subjective meanings" of international institutional activity; Keohane appropriately labelled these theorists as "interpretive scholars" (Kratochwill & Ruggie, 1986, cited in Keohane, 1988, p.381). Reflective theorists have a different understanding as to what institutions constitute and represent. Unlike rationalists who believe that institutions echo the power and preferences of unit constituting them, reflectivists argue that the preferences of individuals are not treated as exogenous; values, norms and practices differ across international society and so effect the formation of institutions. This approach is "a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves" (Neuman, 2000, cited in McNabb, 2010, p.20).

### Common assumptions of both neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism

As discussed, we can see that neorealism and neoliberalism have their differences, yet equally they share similar analytical premises. Both are state-centric structural theories, using state actors as basic units of theoretical analysis. Through the state-centric approach both theories try to explain the behaviour of states with reference to the material structure of the international system (Thomas, 2001, p.10). Whether concerned with relative-gains or absolute-gains, there is common agreement that states act within the rational choice model.

Grieco (1988) recognizes that for both realists and neoliberals there is a common understanding of international anarchy, an absence of a common inter-state government (Grieco, 1988, p.497). In his ground breaking book *Theory of International Politics* (1979) Kenneth Waltz focussed on the 'structure' of the international system and the ramifications of the structure of international relations. A defining feature of the international system is that it is anarchic, with no overarching power governing states (Jackson & Sorensen, 2007, p.46). For neoliberals, international order is defined by the state of anarchy, but contrary to realists, this absence of an overarching authority does not mean that we are in a constant state of war. Charles Lipson (1984) believes that anarchy is the "rosetta stone of international relations", although neorealists slightly exaggerate the importance of anarchy at the expense of interdependence; nevertheless both neorealists and neoliberals recognize anarchy as fundamental to shaping the future of world politics (Lipson, 1984, cited in Baldwin, 1993, p.4).

Although neorealists were primarily concerned with security, and neoliberals focussed on the economy, rationalist theories share a common analytical starting point: i.e states are in the self-interested main actors within the anarchic international system (Baldwin, 1993). Regardless of their slight differences, this self-help approach to anarchy held by rationalists generates a competitive notion to security and creates an issue for collective action. The logic of self-help encourages states to adapt to the system. Although neoliberals have conceded to neorealist the causal powers of the anarchic structure, they argue that this process of self-help can spawn cooperative behaviour between states, even in an exogenously given, self-help system (Wendt, 1992, p.392).

The rationalist approach provides analytical debate for notable issues within the study of IR, such as cooperation among great powers, but offer little guidance in situations where their basic ontological assumption that states are autonomous actors is violated. If decisions made within a state are constrained by external factors, the autonomy is not demonstrated. For both neorealism and neoliberalism, the Westphalian model presents a logical paradox as both theories assume autonomy and self-help. A logical contradiction between self-help and autonomy is purported through focussing on wars between great powers or economic bargaining between major powers, where autonomy is

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rarely an issue; these actions are not consistent with the rules and principles of Westphalian and international legal sovereignty (Krasner, 1999).

Arguments of collective security recognise the importance of military force as a characteristic of international life, but similarly advocates of this theoretical approach believe that there are realistic opportunities to move beyond the self-help world of realism. In order to accept collective security one must adhere to three main principles. First, states must surrender the use of military force to alter status quo. Second, in order to take in the interests of the international community states must broaden their conception of national. Finally, states must look past the fear that encapsulates world politics and begin to trust one another (Baylis, 2005, p.310). The preservation of NATO, even since the end of the Cold War and the Soviet threat, appeared as confirmation that international cooperation could outlast the initial realist-inspired conditions for that institution (Dannreuther, 2007, p.39). Since the end of the Cold War collective security theorists believe that the international environment is more conducive for states to cooperate, sharing values and interests. Neither neorealism nor neoliberalism is able to account for the variability of states willingness to take part in collective security institutions as both theoretical approaches choose to ignore the role of domestic politics in shaping the interests and, hence, the behaviour of states (Spiezio, 1997, p. 112).

## Conclusion

As debate over international relations has evolved over the years, it could certainly be claimed that both neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism are simply manifestations of the same approach. The idea that these two theoretical approaches made up the great debate has been challenged; Inis L. Claude (1981) suggested that neorealism and neoliberalism were complementary as opposed competitive approaches to international relations (Claude, 1981, cited in Baldwin, 1993, p.24). The term 'neo-neo' mentioned by Waever does not suggest that there has been a reformulation of either approach; rather it refers all of the synthesis between realism and liberalism that became possible through emergence of neo-realism and neo-liberal institutionalism (Neumann & Waever, 1997, p.19). This essay has shown that new theoretical approaches that look at world politics through a different lens have become the opponents to the 'neo-neo' debate; uniting through their opposition to positivism and rationalism.

Both 'neo' theoretical approaches have their differences, neorealists focus primarily on high politics and neoliberal institutionalists focus on low politics, but regardless of this, they both share similar worldviews. They share a comparable epistemology and ontology, focus on similar questions, and have a number of assumptions about world politics, solidifying the IR mainstream against reflectivist attacks. The assumptions shared by neo-neo purport that there is no common authority and states are unitary and interest-maximizing actors. Furthermore, the research platform for which these theories focus on behavioural regularities, and the state-centric empirical focus addressing issues that disrupt the status-quo, show clear evidence of synthesis. To conclude, I firmly believe that the evolution of both neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism has resulted in these theories falling under one header, and has subsequently together come under fire from positivist attacks.

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