

The Fallacy of the Realist-Constructivist Dichotomy: A Rejoinder to Robert Murray

Written by Cecelia Lynch

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CECELIA LYNCH, AUG 19 2013

I appreciate e-IR's request to comment on points raised by Robert Murray in "A Realist Revival." I agree with many of Murray's points: realism in International Relations (IR) has engaged great minds and produced great works, realism is most certainly not dead, realist insights help us to understand which humanitarian catastrophes result in "interventions." I was asked to comment from the point of view of a constructivist, and while I am more than happy to do so, I do not agree with all constructions of who/what is a constructivist, especially the idea that constructivism is all, or only, about norms and "ideas."

Despite our areas of agreement—including the utility of blogs such as Murray's—there are significant problems with several of Murray's assumptions. First, it is problematic for the broad set of propositions that is generally called "realism" to establish *the* "core set of ideas" in the field of IR. While self-described realists have almost always maintained an important voice in IR scholarship, what they have assumed and prescribed has varied considerably over time. Early realists such as Martin Wight, E.H. Carr, and Reinhold Niebuhr—now labeled "classical realists"—used the appellation to distinguish themselves from what they called "utopianism," which later morphed into "idealism." But the labels of utopianism and idealism were imposed *by* realists *on* others, who, as I have argued elsewhere,[1] frequently argued in favor of positions that were as plausible as many of those prescribed by the self-described realists.

Today, Murray asserts that realism's core is about "arguments predicated on power, security and self-help." But does this core also concern the nexus of power and morality, as it did for Wight, Carr, Niebuhr, and many others? If so, then Murray's first area in which realism is said to hold sway—humanitarian intervention, using the example of Syria—no longer supports his argument very well, because the moral arguments in favor of and against intervention in Syria today are by no means clear. If realism's core is not concerned with the power/morality problematique, then it begs the question of whether realism—or any theoretical paradigm—can provide an unchanging set of assumptions and arguments for the field.

Murray's post responds in part to a question about the relevance of realism posed by Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, who are generally thought of as liberals or neo-liberals in IR theory. Bringing constructivism into the mix as a response to Murray injects the danger of replicating the realist/constructivist/liberal trope, which asserts that each promotes one or several recognizably different "theories" about the workings of international politics, and that, for every question in IR, the applicability of these three needs to be compared.

However, there is a central fallacy underlying the so-called realist/constructivist (and liberal) debate that needs to be demolished once and for all. I was reminded of this on two recent occasions when graduate students repeated the conventional truism that "realism says this, liberalism says that, and constructivism says this-and-that." On both occasions, my reaction was similar. "Constructivism is a composite of approaches, not a unified theory or paradigm!" (The same might be said for realism and liberalism, but I leave it to adherents of each of these paradigms to argue it out.) It is too easy to adopt the trinitarian theoretical (theological?) debate model replicated in so very many conventional IR journal articles, which postulates that everything in IR has to be grounded in a debate among three approaches. For a while, the theoretical trinity included Marxism, but Constructivism—now generally

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hailed as the third major paradigm in IR—crowded it out. This is unfortunate, both because Marxism has a lot to offer to the analysis of international politics today, and because constructivism is not a “theory” and has no teleology. Moreover, constructivism in its broad sense (of which I am an adherent) includes a variety of feminist and post-structural interpretivist methodologies that get short shrift in the tripartite constriction of IR paradigms.

To his credit, Professor Murray does not repeat this trope explicitly. Yet there is an assumption that realist postulates counter those based on “norms” (frequently but erroneously seen to be the essence of constructivism), and “institutions” (presumably the essence of liberalism).

Actually, one can be a constructivist and agree with much of Murray’s piece, while still disagreeing that the general realist paradigm explains or helps us understand all that is important in IR. One can, for example, assert that analyzing power relations is essential to any IR project, and that definitions of security tend to underlie both state and non-state justifications for or against intervention, while also demonstrating that such relations and definitions are socially constructed, varying over time and place, and that definitions of security are frequently merged with (or can even be trumped by) situations of moral urgency. Would all constructivists argue that, because so-called norms of intervention have allegedly changed, the international community must intervene in Syria? Absolutely not (and for many reasons). One of these is that it is entirely unclear whether a better moral outcome could be obtained by intervention, given the chaotic situation among Syrian rebel groups and the divisions among Syrian civil society. Moreover, external civil society groups, often seen to be the instigators of new norms, are strongly divided over the ethics and potential outcomes of any intervention in that country, for a combination of ethical and pragmatic reasons. Critical analyses of power, moreover, expose a situation in which the U.S., as well as many other nations, is unsure of its ability to engineer any specific outcome in the conflict, whether represented in ethical or self-interested terms. Moreover, the definition of self-interest in this case is capable of considerable fluctuation.

Constructivists have long pointed out that interests and definitions of security change over time, and that power is socially constructed such that “material” or “brute” elements of power cannot be understood apart from their historical context as well as the intersubjectively-defined values attached to them. As a result, the U.S.’s reluctance to intervene in Syria must be seen vis-à-vis the aftermath of the extremely problematic and unsuccessful invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Hesitation in Libya followed; now uncertainty regarding Syria. Beliefs and values about the worth as well as the morality of intervention are frequently symbiotic, especially among those civil society groups seen to be at the forefront of pressing for normative change, and cannot be separated in an ahistorical fashion.

Analyzing the elements of this type of symbiosis along with contextualizing power, security and interest are at the heart of understanding social construction. Conversely, attempts to separate institutions, power, ethics, and norms as discrete variables defeats the purpose of social constructivist approaches. Thus, the opportunity to comment on Murray’s piece gives me the opportunity to challenge the latter tendency, which underlies the fallacy of the realist/constructivist (and liberal) competition, in the hope that we can finally move on.

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[1] Cecelia Lynch, *Beyond Appeasement: Interpreting Interwar Peace Movement in World Politics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999.

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