

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

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ZAC ROGERS, OCT 30 2013

Constructivism has taken up a position within the international relations discourse that characterises it as countenanced to the dominant discourse of realism.[1] The debate within critical theory about whether constructivism is accommodated as a one of its branches, or is in fact cloaked positivism[2], aside, constructivism gained traction after the Cold War, criticising the failings of structural realism to explain change.[3] In doing so it rejected the fundamental assumptions of realism. Its emphasis on inter-subjectivity and the social construction of norms[4] put it, ostensibly, at odds with the realist argument from structure. The targets of constructivist critique, as well as constructivists themselves, subsequently began to characterise constructivism as an epistemological divergence from the positivist, rationalist basis of realism.[5] Constructivists continued, however, to want to study the world empirically, testing their claims about social processes against the real world, in the process annoying critical theorists.

Realists too fell into the habit of categorising constructivism in terms of its divergent epistemology. As such they leveraged the critical theorists point that constructivism contained internal contradictions.[6] They pointed out that whenever constructivists want to provide evidence that their theory explains change, they would refer to something material as constituting that evidence. If the theory however begins with the contention that even material things relate to people via social processes that ultimately determine their meaning, then the material evidence for change surely only begs another question about its own ontology. In this way, realists helped usher constructivism into another paradigm:[7] one which examines the social production of reality but is denied the tools to confirm its findings.

This paper argues against these trends. The contention that constructivism and realism are epistemologically and ontologically inconsistent will be challenged by suggesting processes by which the structure of the international system is produced. In these processes the paper will argue that the lens of social inter-subjectivity can be applied to structural realism to reveal the social basis for realism, and thus the socially produced roots of that structure. Further, the paper will argue that the social and political structures that explain realism accommodate limited scope for the agency of ideas to influence outcomes. Finally, it will argue that even by maximising the agency of individuals and ideas, the limiting effects of collectives means the potential for change is subject to reduction.

Power is the Problem: Realism

The purpose of this brief discussion of power is to highlight the way in which the foundational assumptions of realism arise from the reality of power politics. The structural properties of the international system, and the inherent problems of power associated with them, are not there because realists say they are. They reflect deep underlying currents with roots in human behaviour, manifest in the state, that replicate over time. The state itself is the primary political apparatus with which people have attempted to mitigate the power of nature in social relations. Arguably, membership of a political community is the best mechanism invented to date that can guarantee rights.[8] States by definition are territorial, exclusionary, and armed units, within which political communities can flourish and pursue the spectrum of human goods made possible by the foundations of order and the necessary accompaniment of legitimacy that makes that order stable. The international system, then, is akin to the final unenclosed link in this

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

chain of human agency over power. The problem is that at this level power is not tamed.

While realism in international relations is often conflated with a focus on material capabilities, state centrism, and military force[9] combined with a paucity of interest in domestic affairs, the concept of power remains its underlying driving force.[10] Indeed, realism entered the international relations discourse as a result of scholars grappling with power; and confronting the reality that forces outside of, or in confluence with, human control played a primary role in determining the political world, whether we would have it that way or not.[11] As Carr notes,

“Realism tends to emphasize the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to these forces and these tendencies.”[12]

Realists focus on the state because, for early realists, it was a matter of observation rather than deduction that states were the organisations in international politics that held the power.[13] The discourse later turned this observation into a definition, but it remains so that the state is a powerful political institution worthy of the realists' attention, because it remains the defining political structure through which power is channeled. Realists focus mainly on great powers in turn, because they dominate and shape international politics.

Because the international sphere is characterised by the lack of a centralised governing authority, it has to be viewed through a drastically different moral lens than that through which scholars of politics and power view individuals within states. The basic political structure of the domestic sphere is founded on the social contract, whereby each individual's natural right to the use of force in pursuit of his/her interests is conceded to the state in return for protection from violence, the administration of law and order, and other public goods. The institutions of liberalism and democracy, the foundations of western civilisation, coalesce around this basic structure, giving individuals increased agency over the power structure they live under, without (in theory) disrupting the basic settings of order. In this way, power within states is normatively socialised, civilised, and tempered.

Power in the international sphere is not similarly tempered. Frequently, it is raw and explosive. No such social contract exists,[14] and rights are largely tethered to might. States within the system are armed, uncertain of each other's intentions, devoid of any external security guarantor, and charged alone with their own survival.[15] The basis of their internal legitimacy is contingent largely on their capacity to protect their constituents, borders, and the territory therein. And the international sphere is rarely benign. States are led by this basic structure to the strategy of power maximisation that forms the core of realism in international relations, with its contemporary offensive[16] and defensive[17] variants. It is the properties unique to the international system that derive the realist view of power; those properties are labelled 'structural' because they have little to do with the ideological, political, economic, or social dispositions of the states involved. They are, for all intents and purposes, fixed.

Problems in the foundations: Positivism and rationalism

Saying these properties of the international system are fixed need not be especially problematic. It is consistent with a constructivist viewpoint to acknowledge the social derivation of certain norms while recognising at the same time the extent to which those particular norms are subject to consistent replication, rendering them seemingly permanent. In order to say this however, the argument must first address the critique of its foundations in positivism and rationalism. Once addressed, the paper can begin to explore the social foundations that give rise to the behavioural norms inherent in the realist view of the international system.

Positivism applied to international relations says that there are observable features of states, their environments and circumstances that are the best available avenue through which to study and understand their workings. Scientific positivism acknowledges the extent to which the method and action of observation can influence and potentially distort findings, but asserts that these effects are measurable and possible to compensate for. In other words, the scholar attempting to understand the world is not doomed to relativism due to the subjectivity of the lens through which he/she is working. Structure however presents a problem for positivism because it is not directly observable.

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

The essence of scientific realism as applied in the social sciences is the idea that real social structures exist out there, independent of our observation of them. This perspective contrasts with the logical positivist-empiricist notion that we can only know what we observe[18] and the postmodern-deconstructivist notion that, because all social knowledge is discursively created, no social structures can exist out there independent of our discourses about them.[19] Realism's common emphasis on the often catalogue-like listing of states material capacities is derived from its conviction that military power is the salient means through which states continue to exert their power or deter others from exerting theirs. Military power is that type of power that can actually threaten the survival of the state. Whether this is the only type of power that can do this is a point of contention. The primacy of material capabilities is more an effect of the behavioural turn in political science research during the mid-Cold War period, and its rationalist turn in the late-Cold War period, than an expression of a core realist idea.[20] Nonetheless, in an anarchical system of self-help, where all actors are armed and uncertainty prevails, it is logical for states to seek material strength in the form of offensive and defensive capacities regardless of their own or others intentions.[21]

Realism does not in the process create the circumstances in which conflict can take place. It does not logically follow that a realist lens condemns the system to anarchy; the system *is* anarchical because there is no social contract between states. There is no monopoly on violence internationally. States are charged with nothing short of their own survival. Nor does realist thinking produce the conditions in which an armed peace is the optimum scenario. Rather it merely observes, with respect to power, that this might be so. The chain of cause and effect is readily identifiable within the theory of realism. If the charge is that cause and effect is ultimately unidentifiable, and that all observation affects findings in unknowable ways, then all of social science or for that matter science is a waste of time and resources, condemned to relativism and ultimately more exposed than ever to the workings of power.

A rationalist approach to international relations suggests that states, and the individual leaders therein, *ought to* rather than *do* make rational cost-benefit calculations in surmising their circumstances, given the centrality of power. This approach to the study of politics begins with the premise that we can usefully study political actors, given their exogenously defined preferences, as if they were instrumentally rational.[22] Inherent are a couple of assumptions; first, that states are in possession of a full and lucid account of their circumstances, and second, that their account matches the account of those seeking to understand the state in question. Both of these assumptions are debatable, and the possibility of a state acting *despite* its known cost-benefit scenarios is a problem for realism, as is the problem of impenetrability. Nonetheless, history's account of genuinely irrational states, or states so closed and secretive that history has not revealed their wares so that reason can be applied to their apparent irrationality, is sufficiently rare so that they are identifiable as anomalies, rather than serious problems for realists to grapple with.[23]

The simple logic of how realism determines state intentions is as follows: States simply must worry about survival. The system is anarchical and dangerous; therefore if a state exists at all it must be a survivor. For a state to be a survivor in a system where all actors are armed, where their intentions toward each other are uncertain, and where they are fundamentally self-reliant, it must itself be armed, aim to maximise its power, and be wary of others. To behave otherwise it would not have survived in the first place.[24] In other words, states that are not interested in their own survival are not likely to last in an anarchical world. Therefore, we can assume that those states that have lasted and populate our contemporary world are those with an interest in survival.[25] This gives realists a reasonably accurate framework within which to judge and predict the behaviour of states. To label that framework 'rationalism' in the negative sense is to look past the fact that survival is always about cost-benefit calculation.

The problem is Power: Constructivism

The defining feature of the constructivist view of international relations is, ostensibly, its emphasis on the social production of the ideas that form the basis of state behaviour. These ideas in turn form norms that act as guides or channels through which states not only act but see themselves acting. This view of constructivism arranges itself at the opposing end of the spectrum in relation to realism, going as far as claiming the divergence in epistemologies[26] that this paper is addressing. But this view is a misconception. This view can only be perpetuated if one takes an extremely narrow view of realism, while at the same time pandering to the equally misconceived realist critique of constructivism that attempts to exploit its apparent liberal, idealistic tendencies.

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

The narrow view of realism is that it takes material power as the given foundation of international relations, and that in doing so is engaged in a tautology that is responsible for reproducing that reality. That somehow (the actual methods aimed at achieving this end are mostly left out), by altering the discourse on security relations between states, not to mention their own internal sense of security and identity, constructivism can open the way for the socialisation of power in the international sphere. By reducing the structural features of international politics to the domain of ideas, constructivism posits the potential for change as its central hypothesis, arguing sharply that realism gets its fundamental assumptions wrong despite its strong explanatory force over the historical record.

For states to alter their sense of identity and security, individuals must be able to. Realists insist that at this level, the presence of fear and insecurity is ubiquitous to the human condition.[27] Constructivism on the other hand tends toward the view that human nature is infinitely malleable. Whether or not this question can be definitively answered, another, more obstructive problem exists for the constructivist argument. Even if it were true that individual human nature were infinitely malleable, and that fear and insecurity were not states of nature but were able to be deconstructed by some form of social engineering, the problem of collectives would still remain. It is one thing to alter the consciousness, identity, and nature of an individual; it is another thing entirely for that change to take hold in a population, where fear and uncertainty are such powerful replicators.

The argument from constructivism ultimately seems unable to avoid the need for such fundamental change. The problem is, leaving aside the massive controversy of whether or not such changes should be sought (conceived of, implemented, and administered by whom?), the question remains whether it is even possible given the tendency of collectives to reduce potential down to familiar sets of human tendencies. Realist logic does not require that all individuals be aggressive or self-interested, simply that some of them are. As long as some people will try to accumulate power, and no countervailing power stops them, other people face insecurity. This implies then that a constructivist theory of change at the level of the individual would require that all individuals be non-competitive, or that no individual seeks power at the expense of any other.

Ideas vs. Ideals

Liberal international theory picks up this contention, moderating it to the point where individuals need only to have observable preferences that can be accommodated by cooperation for conflict to be avoided. The essence of this school of thought is that people have consistent, reasonable, and predictable preferences, which they pursue rationally. As a result, well-designed political institutions within which people can rationally pursue their interests, in a way that interferes as little as possible with the abilities of others to pursue theirs, accommodates sufficient appeal to reason as to obviate any necessity for power politics. In other words, for the liberal idealist the right political structure can, indeed, insure perpetual peace, as Kant surmised.[28]

This viewpoint obviously contains the assumption that given the requisite structure, individuals not only will, but ought, to pursue conflict minimisation strategies. Wendt himself claims, with reference to Kant, that the endogenous dynamic of international anarchy is progressive. In other words, absent exogenous shock, the culture of anarchy will tend to evolve from the Hobbesian world of enemies, to the Lockean world of rivals and, ultimately, to the Kantian world of friends.[29] But what if it doesn't? The realist response is that peace is fundamentally contingent on the circumstances it is found in, and circumstances are always changing. Peoples preferences change, and when they do, interference is inevitable. From this perspective, the liberal point is utopian, or idealism cloaked as rationalism. Power is not eliminated by the mere providing of opportunities to cooperate. And nor is it rational to risk being cheated by committing to a cooperative agenda in a self-help world. From Morgenthau,

“Peace is subject to the conditions of time and space and must be established and maintained by different methods and under different conditions of urgency in the every-day relations of concrete nations. The problem of international peace as such exists only for the philosopher.”[30]

To some extent, no matter how well designed the structure of political institutions, power will always be the ultimate arbiter of outcomes in international politics. This is because many, if not most, international political problems have at least some material cost/benefit consequences, meaning the outcome will likely reflect the interests of the actors best

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

able to stake their claim to those gains, that is, the actors with the greater power.[31]

If power, then, is to remain at the centre of international political agency, what have constructivists to say that is a genuine divergence from realism that is at the same time, not idealism? Perhaps not a lot, as Wendt is inferring here:

“The proposition that the nature of international politics is shaped by power relations invariably is listed as one of the defining characteristics of Realism. This cannot be a *uniquely* Realist claim, however, since then every student of international politics would be a Realist”.[32]

Wendt is saying that rather than seeking to deny the existence of power in international relations, or that power is somehow extinguishable from human relations, constructivism seeks to recast its stigma. At its core is the constant reminder that human relationships to power are, if not infinitely, somewhat *more* malleable than realism tends to predict. In this way, we can begin to see how the two traditions are not epistemologically incompatible. Rather, they merely begin from divergent assumptions which, in turn, tend to influence their subsequent methodological and normative trajectories. In essence, constructivism is forced to grapple with the problem of power in the same way that any theory of international relations is. At base, then, the explanatory gap common to both realism and constructivism emerges around explaining how and why certain norms exist, why others do not, and what exactly drives the process of change at a mutually compatible level. In other words, what properties of power, both socially constructed and objectively material, determine its malleability?

This paper contends that the confusion around the epistemic foundations of constructivism and the circular bias of realism arise from this gap. Absent a finer grained explanation, constructivists commonly find themselves sliding into liberal institutionalism[33] by positing the processing site of their theory within the world of international institutions. Constructivism acquires too much baggage from liberalism in this case. By adopting the liberal bias toward institutionalised cooperation,[34] or at best choosing to study issue areas compatible with liberal idealism in relatively noncritical ways,[35] constructivists inherit the argumentative burden of utopianism that arises from the ideal that carefully planned political structures, which favour cooperation between states, can mitigate and eventually eliminate the competition for power that arises from the nature of the system itself. In other words, they are lumped with an argument that cannot deal with power, when constructivism ought to be about precisely how power works in the world.

On the other hand, the gap leaves realism perpetually open to claims that it does not sufficiently explain change,[36] but tends to merely observe it and then explain how the resulting material changes are consistent with its theory of power. Classical realism sees human beings in as much their moral as political guises, and acknowledges the role of morality and its intimate relationship with power. In this way, realism contends with both the crippling and facilitating influence of ideas, and ideals, on the use of power. It does not, of course, submit that ideas are the *source* of power. But the details of the relationships between power and sets of replicating ideas (morals) are not clarified, leaving realism to fend off charges of tautology and worse, often with a lame sense of righteousness that only serves to galvanise its opponents and obfuscate understanding, leading indirectly, as well, to the claims of paradigmatic divergence being argued against here. Structural (or neo) realism fares even worse, and was the original focus of constructivist critique due to the sterility of Waltz’s account, in which morality was largely unincorporated.[37]

Conclusion

Power remains the fundamental basis of international relations theory. While critical theory reminds the scholar of IR that even such a statement is contingent on a particular conception of power, inevitably located within a discourse, and as such subject to manipulation by theories whose core assumptions emerge from power, the IR scholar has little alternative. Power is what scholars are studying when they are met with a world that exists partially or wholly beyond human control. They must be rational in studying such a subject because the rationale is a primary tool of understanding. They engage positivism because as scientists they need evidence to back up what they deduce. And they use induction because not all that exerts an influence is directly observable. They must proceed on the basis that power in the international sphere can be understood even if it cannot realistically be tamed.

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

This paper began by outlining the way in which realism and constructivism have become commonly conceptualised as opposing poles within the international relations discourse. It is common to hear and read that they make fundamentally divergent assumptions about the world, and that their epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies are like chalk and cheese. It then delved into the foundations of the two traditions. It found that realism, in engaging with power, acknowledges the way human morality is inextricable from the discussion.[38] It matters to realism what people think about power because that fundamentally influences how it is administered, received, and opposed or accepted. The paper explained how realism arrives at its primary assumptions, and why it tends to focus on the material might of states, their distrust of each other, and the inevitable competition for power in an untamed world. It presented a perspective on realism that reveals the way it is constructed from common, observable features of the human condition; features that happen to replicate with an unerring efficacy that renders them seemingly fixed but are poorly understood in international relations theory.[39]

The paper then looked at how constructivism arrives at its convictions about international relations. It pinpointed how constructivism can be dragged in the direction of idealism by what it chooses to focus on, namely liberal institutionalism. It identified how constructivism is forced to deal with the problem of power at the level of individuals, and how it does not provide a model for doing so. The paper suggested that the same explanatory gap that makes realism vulnerable to attack renders constructivism weak at its most crucial point, namely, explaining how norms change and providing a model of how this change might be engineered without abusing power, the very thing constructivism self-identifies with mitigating. This explanatory gap presents an important opportunity for further study, with an eye to bridging the discursive divide between realism and constructivism and in the process galvanising both traditions toward an enhanced understanding of the workings of power in the international system.

The viewpoint of this paper is that realism and constructivism contain no great fundamental divergence. Realism, as described in the previous section as the point of emanation of deeper undercurrents of social tendencies, makes claims about material power and its subsequent structure only according to the logical derivation of those undercurrents. Likewise, good constructivism is by no means necessarily liberal, utopian, nor realist. It should and does reflect only those identifiable tendencies within the inter-subjective social space. It is to that space that any theory of the behaviour of states ought to be ultimately justifiable, and there is no reason why constructivism and realism could not reach converging deductions.

This paper would assert that these are positive findings for both traditions to embrace. Engaging empirically does not make constructivism a positivist rip-off; rather it contributes a range of valuable perspectives on the ways power is translated through people. If it finds reason to identify when and how the potential for change is limited, this helps to enhance the scholarship aimed in general at the agent/structure problem.[40] Constructivism is not idealism, because idealism recognizes a single ideal, a universal political morality toward which we should strive.[41] Underlying this is inevitably a moral idealism that sees power in the hands of some ideal organisation as better than power in the hands of the traditional elites. The realist response is that power will ultimately be used by those who accrue it for a specific set of ends, and constructivists identify strongly with this contention.

Because not all moral ideals are compatible, nor will the ends to which power can be invested, even if used in the interest of a moral ideal, be compatible. In other words, even if the ideal norms in question were generally accepted in the relations among countries, power would still matter. At some point their goals will differ; at that time the relative power among them will begin to become important. Whether in interpretation, out of rational self-interest, or for psychological reasons, all actors in the international system at some point in time will differ in their interpretations of those norms. Rather than dismissing or talking past the constructivist critique, realists ought to pursue the finer grained mechanisms of their theory. To do so, the constructivist methodology offers a window into the mechanisms of power as a social phenomenon, which sees its path converging with realism in explaining how structure emerges and further, if and how it could be changed. That process need not lead to idealism; it can only be useful to examine and re-examine the assumptions a theory makes so that they may be refined, simplified and even converge with other theories once thought of as epistemologically divorced.

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Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

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[2] Price, R. and Reus-Smit, C. 'Dangerous Liaisons: Critical International Theory and Constructivism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4(3), (1998), pp. 259-294.

[3] Brooks, S.G. & Wohlforth, W.C. 'Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Re-evaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas', *International Security*, 25.3 (Winter 2000), p.5.

[4] Reus-Smit, C. "Constructivism," in *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed. Scot Burchill and others Basingstoke: Palgrave, (2005), p.195.

[5] See Mearsheimer, J.J. 'The False Promise of International Institutions', *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter, 1994-1995), pp. 37-42.

[6] Mearsheimer, J.J. (Winter, 1994-1995), pp. 42-44.

[7] See for example Wendt, A. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (1999).

[8] Arendt, H. *Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, (1973).

[9] Mearsheimer, J.J. (Winter, 1994-1995), pp. 5-49; Jervis, R. 'Realism in the Study of World Politics.' *International Organization* 52, pp. 971-991.

[10] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 327.

[11] Morgenthau, H. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. New York: Knopf, (1948); Carr, E.H. *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, New York: Harper and Row, (1964).

[12] Carr, E.H. (1964), p. 10.

[13] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 327.

[14] The English School of international relations contends there is a 'society of states' nonetheless in the international sphere, comprised of states that share a common set of interests and are linked by culture, tradition, and history. Even the thickest version of this however does not resemble the social contract of the domestic sphere.

[15] See Mearsheimer, J.J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W.W. Norton and co. (2001), pp. 29-54.

[16] See Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001).

[17] See Waltz, K.N. *Theory of international politics*, Reading: MA: Addison-Wesley, (1979).

[18] Lapid, Y. 'The Third Debate: On the Prospects of International Theory in a Post-Positivist Era', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33, pp. 235-254.

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

[19] For example, George, J. *Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re) Introduction to International Relations*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, (1994).

[20] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 329.

[21] Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001), p. 3.

[22] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 328.

[23] Contemporary North Korea is a case in point, where the rationality of its leaders is openly questioned. More problematic for scholars of international security politics are questions of command and control within states for whom the support of such structural procedures looks vulnerable.

[24] This basic argument from Mearsheimer, J.J. (2001), pp. 46-48.

[25] Morgenthau, H. (1948), p. 13; Waltz, K. (1979), pp. 74-77.

[26] See Hughes, B. *Continuity and Change in World Politics: Competing Perspectives*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, (2000); Lieber, R. *No Common Power: Understanding International Relations*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, (2001).

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[29] Wendt, A. (1999), pp. 308-312.

[30] Morgenthau, H. *Scientific Man versus Power Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1946), p. 217.

[31] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 333.

[32] Wendt, A. (1999), pp. 96-97.

[33] Sterling-Folker, J. Competing Paradigms or Birds of a Feather? Constructivism and Neoliberal Institutionalism Compared, *International Studies Quarterly*, 44, (2000), pp. 97-119.

[34] Many contemporary constructivists (particularly in the US) write as if international society is a given, and that by extension it, as the site of norm production, is an overall positive. See Sikkink, K. 'Human Rights, Principled Issue-Networks, and Sovereignty in Latin America', *International Organization*, 47, pp. 411-441; Burgerman, S. *Moral Victories: How Activists Provoke Multilateral Action*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (2001).

[35] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 335.

[36] See Ruggie, J.G. 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity', *World Politics*, 35, (1983), pp. 261-285.

[37] Walker, R.B.J. 'Realism, Change, and International Political Theory', *International Studies Quarterly*, 31, (1987), pp. 65-86.

[38] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 336.

[39] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 337.

Realism and Constructivism as Compatible Epistemologies

Written by Zac Rogers

[40] Wendt, A. (Summer, 1987), pp. 335-370.

[41] Barkin, J.S. (2003), p. 337.

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