

The Neo-Neo Debate in International Relations Theory

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Progress or Regression?

“For better or for worse institutional theory is a half-sibling of neo-realism” (Keohane, Martin, 1999: 3)

Introduction

For many theorists of international relations, the debate between Neorealists and Neoliberal Institutionalists marks the central discussion which informs much of the field's scholarship. For better or for worse, the so-called Neo-Neo debate has dominated scholars' attention and has produced a number of works which argue for one or the other position or aim to reconcile the two approaches (Keohane 1986; Baldwin 1993). However, can the Neo-Neo debate be said to advance theory in the field as a whole? Or does it rather impede theoretical progress by masquerading fundamental points of agreement as points of contention?

Following a brief outline of the characteristics of both theories, this essay will examine the Neo-Neo debate from three perspectives in order to make a judgment on the two dominant theories' contribution to theoretical advancement within International Relations. First, it will highlight the striking methodological, epistemological and ontological similarities on which the two approaches are based. Secondly, it will be assessed how the approaches' agreed conception of anarchy catalyzes agreement on many fronts. Lastly, this essay will examine the main disagreement between Neorealists and Neoliberal Institutionalists over the extent of conflict and cooperation in the international system. Ultimately, this essay will conclude that the Neo-Neo debate in and of itself does not represent a significant advancement of IR scholarship due to the absence of real discussion with respect to the fundamental assumptions of IR and its emphasis on converting IR into a natural science.

Neorealism and Neoliberalism

In analogy to the adage coined by Alfred North Whitehead that European philosophy consists of 'a series of footnotes to Plato' (1979: 39), it could be argued that Neorealist theory as we know it is but an interpretation of Kenneth Waltz' seminal *Theory of International Politics*. In this work, Waltz set out to redefine the principles of a Realist enquiry of International Relations, in the process fundamentally rearranging both the methodological as well as ontological foundations of the Realist school. Waltz aimed to put Realism on a more theoretically sound footing, which for him meant creating a theory based on the structure of the international system, which constrains the rational actors that are subject to it and the underlying condition of anarchy. Waltz criticized that Realism as espoused by Hans Morgenthau did not constitute a theory (1990: 26). Therefore, Neorealism aims to resemble a more scientific framework which retains recognizable Realist features such as power and conflict.

On the other hand, Neoliberal Institutionalism maintains that 'in an interdependent world, states will seek efficiency in managing collective problems presented by international anarchy' (Kay, 2006: 62). It too aims at presenting a more coherent reformulation of a liberal conception of International Relations, relying on models borrowed from economics and rational choice theory to understand events and develop explanatory models. According to Keohane, the principal question preoccupying Neoliberals is 'how institutions affect incentives facing states' (1989: 11). Thus, it could be argued that Neoliberals share many of the premises of their Neorealist cousins, ranging from the underlying

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condition of anarchy to the centrality of states, but come to different conclusions in some instances. A selection of both shared premises and different conclusions will be discussed below.

International Relations as a Science

In 1939, E. H. Carr made a sharp distinction between what he called Idealism and the Realism he advocated. Yet, the new interpretations of Realist and Idealist theory arguably have more in common with each other than they do with their intellectual forebears. In contrast to Realism, Neorealism discounts human nature as a meaningful variable in order to strengthen theoretical parsimony. Neoliberalism breaks with Idealism in paying little attention to the role of ideas. A significant convergence between Neorealism and Neoliberalism is the attempt to reflect properties more usually associated with natural sciences within IR scholarship.

Waltz points out that Neorealism's point of departure is its conception of a systemic structure, which defines international politics (1990: 30). Secondly, he emphasizes that Neorealism follows a deductive as opposed to an inductive approach (1990: 30). Thus, the intention is to move away from explaining idiosyncratic motivations governments may have and instead examine the structural imperatives all units within the system are subject to. In order to do this, states are conceived of as 'unitary-rational agents' (Grieco, 1993: 118). Both the structural approach and the assumption of rationality bear resemblance to the natural sciences. Essentially, Neoliberalism agrees with the epistemological and methodological stance taken by Neorealism. As Nye points out, Liberalism in its 'simplest forms' (1988: 238) has been discredited. Therefore, Neoliberalism relies on positivist enquiries built on rational-actor models to construct theory.

Elias and Sutch have pointed out that positivists have played a role in preventing further enquiry into non-positivist knowledge (2007: 14). Both Neorealism and Neoliberalism are guilty of the same charge. Through the application of rational choice theory and an overreliance on quantitative methodologies, they succeeded in marginalizing critical theories by appearing to be more scientific. In and of itself, this is not a problem. However, catalyzed by the inward character of the Neo-Neo debate, the only significant achievement has been the detailed analysis of both theories and what each side perceives to be the faults of the other. Yet, assumptions, methodologies and biases are not being discussed at all. While promulgating the debate to represent the culmination of IR scholarship, there seems to be little awareness that the debate merely represents a very specific realm within IR. In this context, Waever has observed that 'both underwent a self-limiting redefinition towards an anti-metaphysical, theoretical minimalism' (1996: 163).

Thus, the purportedly scientific approach taken by the Neo-Neo debate is supposed to generate parsimony. Yet, it also sacrifices much theoretical depth and critical analysis. Kratochwil argues that the 'pseudo-scientific pretensions' (1993: 64) of positivism as applied to IR have played a role in stifling real debate. Furthermore, he criticizes that the positivist turn has focused on methodology at the expense of substantive advancements (1993: 68). By reinforcing this dynamic, the Neo-Neo debate has contributed to this development, isolating itself from criticism through the deligitimization of other forms of ontological and epistemological enquiry.

Anarchy

According to Lipson, anarchy as a fundamental idea is 'the Rosetta Stone of international relations' (1984: 22). It is therefore unsurprising that both Neorealists as well as Neoliberal Institutionalists derive their conclusions from the structural conditions set by what they conceive as an anarchic international system. In abstract terms, Neorealists argue that conflict occurs because of the absence of order analogous to that which exists within states, while Neoliberals stress that the prospects for cooperation are constrained by anarchy, but not made impossible. Yet, what do we mean when we say anarchy? Given that this identification is perhaps the most important substantive feature for both theories, this represents a problem.

Milner has criticized the lack of a clear definition of the concept of anarchy which is employed widely by both theories. She identifies two different meanings attached to the term: lack of order, and lack of government (1991: 69). Yet, both definitions present problems when applied to the use of the term anarchy in International Relations scholarship. With regard to the first meaning, both Neorealists and Neoliberals seem to gloss over the fact that it is difficult to

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speak of a complete lack of order within the international system. Bull's concept of the 'international society' (1977: 15) is, to a large extent, predicated on the existence of common frameworks which define rules and institutions. Other authors too acknowledge that the international system does not necessarily lack order (Oye, 1985: 226). In fact, Milner argues that some concepts inherent within a Neorealist framework, such as the balance of power, are ordering principles themselves (1991: 70).

In terms of the second meaning, what do we mean by government? Waltz seems to employ a Weberian definition of government, or lack thereof: there is no monopoly on the legitimate use of force within the international system (1979: 103-4). For Neoliberals, lack of government implies a different consequence, namely the absence of a central authority to enforce contracts. Yet others highlight the legal dimension implied by a lack of government (Wight, 1978: 102).

However, there is scarcely any clarification what Neorealist and Neoliberal scholars mean when they stress anarchy as a defining feature. Wendt's phrase that 'anarchy is what states make of it' (1992: 395) reduces this problem to a single sentence. Both Neorealism and Neoliberal Institutionalism fail to account for the ways in which rules, institutions and state actions come to be seen as legitimate or illegitimate. By comparison, Hans Morgenthau acknowledged the difference between legitimate and illegitimate processes (1985: 34). The structuralist theories espoused by Neorealists and Neoliberals deprive anarchy of much of its significance. Some scholars go as far as stating that, in fact, anarchy does not in any way underlie the international system (Adem, 2002: 20; Onuf, 1990: 14). Thus, both the status of anarchy as well as its precise definition point to significant points of contention for which the Neo-Neo debate does not find the right answers.

Conflict and Cooperation

One of the biggest points within the Neo-Neo debate is the extent to which both theories acknowledge the potential for cooperation within the international system. While Neorealists see conflict as the prevailing undercurrent, Neoliberals identify prospects for cooperation, in large part due to the role played by institutions and regimes (Grieco, 1993: 117). Thus, there is a legitimate difference with regard to an undoubtedly important feature of international politics.

However, the extent to which the minutiae of conflict and cooperation are discussed is perhaps detrimental to the overall purpose of IR scholarship. Conflict by itself is not the only field of enquiry within IR. Certainly, Neorealists and Neoliberals also discuss other issues, but they often seem tangential to the central concern about how to explain stability within an anarchical system. Kay has shown that, contrary to Neorealist claims, institutions facilitate cooperation in the realm of security (2006: 74), while Jervis clarifies the difference between offensive and defensive Realism with regard to each approach's perspective on cooperation (1999: 50).

Even though these authors present a nuanced understanding of conflict and cooperation, their terms as to what conflict and cooperation entails are narrowly defined. There is little room for historical or cultural interpretations, given that the Neo-theories derive their explanations from the structure of the international system and a rational-actor model. Therefore, Neorealism and Neoliberalism can only come to powerful conclusions within their own framework of enquiry, rather than, as they aspire to be, representing a definitive account of the prospects for cooperation.

Conclusion

Kenneth Waltz claims that structural analyses 'tell us a small number of big and important things' (1986: 329). Yet, who determines what is or is not important? This essay has argued that the Neo-Neo debate has not advanced IR scholarship as a whole, but has rather narrowed the field to a superficial enquiry based on questionable assumptions and methodologies that may or may not be suitable for the discipline. By treating International Relations as if it were a science, the Neo-Neo debate is ultimately ahistoric. Anarchy as an essential concept is taken for granted without proper explanations what it means or why it is significant. Moreover, the main contention over the extent of cooperation and conflict only encompasses one dimension, while categorically leaving out multiple other angles.

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Therefore, the Neo-Neo debate is just that; a debate. Each theory for itself may have presented significant perspectives on IR as a scholarly field. Yet, by engaging in a closed-off discussion, Neorealists and Neoliberals perpetuated orthodoxy rather than making substantial gains in IR scholarship. If the considerable limitations of the debate were acknowledged and its fundamental assumptions challenged, the Neo-Neo debate would represent a useful phase in IR scholarship. However, by masquerading as its zenith, it rather stifled it and does therefore not represent an advancement of IR theory.

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