

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

# Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Rationalist and Cognitivist Theorists of International Regimes

<https://www.e-ir.info/2008/04/26/considering-cognitivism%e2%80%99s-contribution-possibilities-for-constructive-cooperation-between-rationalist-and-cognitivist-theorists-of-international-regimes/>

FEDOR MEERTS, APR 26 2008

All but the staunchest realist would agree that international regimes form an important part of the emerging mechanisms of global governance, whether seen in the field of trade liberalisation as embodied by World Trade Organization negotiations, or in the field of environmental protection as embodied by regimes such as the Kyoto Protocol, or in the field of international human rights as embodied by the international human rights framework. As a result, the study of international regimes deserves careful attention. This essay will follow the widely-used consensus definition of 'international regimes' that was formulated by Stephen Krasner, wherein international regimes are seen as "principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area" (1982: 185). Even though this definition has its disadvantages, such as its conceptual elasticity, it is certainly sufficient as a working definition.

In *Theories of International Regimes*, Andreas Hasenclever, Peter Mayer and Volker Rittberger characterise the theoretical perspectives on the study of international regimes by their main subjects of analysis: interest, power and knowledge. According to interest-based or neo-liberal theories, which have become the mainstream approach to the study of international regimes, state interest is the main explanatory variable of the formation as well as staying-power (or robustness) of international regimes; in this approach international regimes are seen as devices that "facilitate agreements by providing rules, norms, principles, and procedures that help actors to overcome barriers to agreement" such as uncertainty and resulting high transaction costs (Keohane 1982: 354). Power-based or realist theories of international regimes focus on state power in their explanations of international regimes and subsequently mostly see international regimes as epiphenomena of interstate bargaining. As Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger do well to point out, neoliberal and realist theories of international regimes share certain significant characteristics, most importantly a "commitment to rationalism, a meta-theoretical tenet which portrays states as self-interested, goal-seeking actors whose behaviour can be accounted for in terms of the maximisation of individual utility" (1997: 23).

# Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Rationalist and Knowledge Based Theories

Written by Fedor Meerts

Interaction between states does not change an individual state's interests or perceptions of its interests; in other words, "interaction (including cooperation) does *not* affect actors' utility functions or identities" (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 25).

In tandem with the study of international relations, the study of international regimes has long been dominated by these two rationalist schools of thought. However, not rightfully so. This essay argues that knowledge based theories can be seen not only as a necessary addendum to interest and power based theories of international regimes, but must also be seen as a necessary alternative to these theories; in this sense knowledge based theories correct earlier theorisation. This proposition is closely related to the distinction between two 'types' of knowledge based theories made in *Theories of International Regimes*. To use the terms employed by Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger, 'weak cognitivists' argue that the rationalist theories are incomplete because they ignore the effects of causal and normative beliefs on international actors' perceptions of problems and their interests, while 'strong cognitivists' challenge the entire ontological basis of the "rationalist mode of analysis" arguing that international actors cannot – and should not – be characterised as rational utility-maximisers (1997: 137),

The first section of this essay deals with diagnosis by weak cognitivist of the shortcomings of neoliberal and realism theories of international regimes and outlines their prescriptions. The second section argues that strong cognitivist objections to the – unrealistic – rationalist assumptions of neoliberal and realist theorists hold much sway, but that the strong cognitivist research program alone might not be sufficient to explain actual state behaviour. The conclusion argues that while weak cognitivism is a necessary addendum to rationalist theories, strong cognitivism can best be viewed as a necessary alternative to these earlier theories. Together they provide a necessary corrective to earlier rationalist theorisation.

## Weak Cognitivism: A Necessary Addendum to Rationalist Regime Theories

Weak cognitivists take offense with realist and neoliberal assumptions of exogenously given and relatively fixed state identities and interests. They rightly argue that "the processes which produce the self-understandings of particular states (i.e. their identities) as well as the objectives which they pursue in their foreign policy (i.e. what they perceive to be in their interest)" should be important subjects of analysis, since they are "a significant source of variation in international behaviour" (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 136). Causal and normative, or principled, beliefs/ideas are important determinants of state identity as well as important influences on the perceptions that states have of what are their interests. As Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger note, these beliefs cannot be reduced to the material environment, realist and neoliberal 'power' and 'wealth', and have an at least partially independent influence of their own on state behaviour (1997: 137).

# Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Realism and Cognitivism

Written by Fedor Meerts

It is important to note that weak cognitivists are not necessarily unhappy with the realist and neoliberal assumption that states are rational utility-maximisers. As a result, what they argue for is the problematisation and analysis of what shapes the perception of this utility: knowledge, such as causal and normative beliefs displayed in “phenomena such as complex learning and normative change” (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 216). Students of international regimes (and other fields within the international relations discipline) “should seek to integrate knowledge structures and dynamics into their theoretical models” (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 140). In this sense, Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger are right to point out that weak cognitivism can be seen as complementary to traditional theories of international regimes; indeed, it does not challenge the core ontological assumptions about rationality of traditional theories, but merely opens up the black boxes of identity and interest formation, while adding several new ontological assumptions (the two most important of which are discussed below). Weak cognitivism must be seen as an important and necessary addendum that goes beyond and ‘cures’ traditional realist analyses by problematising state identities and states’ perceptions of their interests. It thereby analyses ideas both as a link preceding rational utility-maximising decision making in the causal chain (for instance, ideas shape the perception of interests) and as an intervening link between perceived interests and outcomes; in both ways it fills “gaps in realist explanations of international regimes” (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 216-217).

Weak cognitivists start from the assumption “that the knowledge actors carry in their heads and project in their international encounters significantly shapes their behaviour and expectations” (Haas, 1990: 7). Goldstein and Keohane identify three causal pathways through which ideas can influence behaviour and expectations (1993: 8-24). Firstly, principled beliefs of actors influence the definition and choice of ends from the large amount of possible ends. At the same time, causal beliefs play an important role in the choice of the means by which to achieve the aforementioned ends. Secondly, intersubjectively shared ideas can serve as “*focal points* which help to define acceptable solutions to collective action problems” (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 144). Thirdly, when ideas have become (intersubjectively shared) international norms and rules they constrain state policy choices by making certain choices more attractive than others. In light of these three causal pathways it is unsurprising that international regimes can have a significant influence on the formation of knowledge – they are not only shaped by it but can in turn also shape and lock in certain ideas about norms and policies. Perceptions of state interests are not static and can be changed by – amongst others – participation in an international regime. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, intersubjectively shared understandings are an important precondition for regime formation and play an important role in regime strength and robustness. States need to share at least some common ideas about both the problems and solutions the regime is meant to respectively deal with and provide.

A second, and closely related, important assumption in the weak cognitivist research program is that because states

# Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Realism and Neoliberalism

Written by Fedor Meerts

need to make informed choices concerning problems they face, they are uncertainty reducers. In contrast to Keohane's neoliberal conception of uncertainty which is concerned with uncertainty about other states' actions and interests, weak cognitivists argue that states are also concerned with reducing the uncertainty of the consequences of their own actions. Epistemic communities can help reduce the latter form of uncertainty. As Peter Haas has argued, a high degree of this uncertainty coupled with intersubjectively shared understandings amongst experts and expert access to policy makers increases the impact-potential of epistemic communities on international interaction (Haas, 1992: 3). As a result learning must be seen as having a potentially important influence on both state strategies and perceptions of interests: new understandings of problems and solutions can change both.

Weak cognitivism is an important addendum to the traditional rationalist theories because it opens up the processes of identity and interest formation to analysis and adds important assumptions regarding the role of knowledge and uncertainty in these processes. As we have seen, weak cognitivists leave most fundamental rationalist assumptions intact. However, can "norms and rules [be conceived to be] functional responses of rational actors to perceived collective action problems" or should we see international regimes, and indeed also states, as "embedded in the broader normative structures of an international society"? (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 155). Should we see actors in the international arena as rational utility-maximisers, or as role players, or perhaps as both? As is outlined in the following section, strong cognitivists take up these questions and challenge the very foundations of realist and neoliberal theories.

## Strong Cognitivism: A Necessary Alternative to Rationalist Regime Theories

Strong cognitivists reject not only the realist and neoliberal positivist epistemology but also their ontology that "gives actors priority over rules", thereby giving primacy to states over norms and rules – the former create and use the latter to solve problems (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 157). These two points of epistemology and ontology are discussed in greater detail below, but at present it is prudent to mention that as consequence of them strong cognitivists argue that the rationalist perspective is inappropriate for the study of international regimes and that self-interest lacks power as an explanatory variable. Strong cognitivists therefore focus on for instance "questions of the legitimacy of normative injunctions, the importance of intersubjectively shared meanings and the role of communication in their formation and reformation, the process of identity formation in international relations, and the conservative power of historical structures" (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 157).

Firstly, strong cognitivists posit that the rationalist positivist (objective) epistemology is inadequate because international society cannot be characterised as involving purely cause-effect mechanisms and researchers cannot be separated from the social world; as a result the rationalist epistemology should be supplanted by a critical and self-reflexive intersubjective epistemology. Strong cognitivists argue that states are dependent on, and in fact constituted by, structures such as international regimes. As Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger write, this "ascription to regimes of a constitutive dimension is problematic for rationalists because it blurs the distinction between cause and effect"

# Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Rationalists and Cognitivists

Written by Fedor Meerts

(1997: 164). Positivist causal epistemology is ill-suited for the analysis of 'constitutive causes' (or as Aristotle calls them, 'material causes'). Although cognitivists largely do away with a causal epistemology in favour of a wider analysis of "the emergence and dynamics of [...] common understandings", it might also be worth considering broadening the conception of causation – as proposed by Milja Kurki, who argues that a return to the broader Aristotelian conception of causation, including constitutive (material and formal) and final alongside efficient causes, allows us to bridge the traditional positivist-cognitivist, explaining-understanding, causes-reasons divide (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 165; Kurki 2006). In any case, cognitivists do well to point out that the traditional cause-effect analysis of positivism is largely inappropriate for the study of international regimes. Additionally, strong cognitivists rightfully point us to the intersubjective quality of the social world. No human action can be separated from the wider social world and all action is informed by theory. As a result, positivist 'distancing' between subject (observer) and object (observed) is impossible. Researchers should be self-reflexive about their prior theoretical dispositions.

Secondly, according to strong cognitivists, states are not rational atomistic actors, but are in fact constituted by international institutions such as norms and rules. States are states by virtue of international rules and norms affirming them to be states. As a result, international norms and rules are not merely problem-solving devices. Strong cognitivists posit an "ontology which emphasises the dependency of state identities and cognitions on international institutions and relates the formation and maintenance of particular international regimes to these pre-established identities" (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 157). Many rationalist scholars of international regimes have accepted the validity of this cognitivist ontology, but have argued that analysis based on rationalist assumptions can still provide a good explanation of the creation and use of international regimes because – once states have been socialised into this system of international norms and rules – they still make rational utility-maximising decisions based on cost-benefit analysis. However, strong cognitivists feel the need to go further than this, rejecting "the rationalist interpretation of state behaviour in terms of utility-maximising in favour of a conception of states as role players" (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 155). In line with James March and Johan Olsen's important work *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics*, strong cognitivists argue that "[a]ction is often based more on identifying the normatively appropriate behaviour than on calculating the return expected from alternative choices" (1989: 22). Decision makers follow a 'logic of appropriateness' instead of the rational utility-maximising 'logic of consequentiality'; "[t]he terminology is one of duties and obligations rather than anticipatory, consequential decision making" (March and Olsen 1989: 23). Behaviour is determined by rules and as a consequence action is "a matching of a situation to the demands of a position" (March and Olsen 1989: 23). While action is intentional, it is not wilful (March and Olsen 1989: 160). It must be noted that this view of decision makers as role-players is not wholly deterministic, since decision makers can choose which rules they will follow and how they

# Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Realism and Cognitivism

Written by Fedor Meerts

will apply those rules – and as a result they might be able to redefine what is considered as appropriate (i.e. change the leading rules).

March and Olsen argue that even though action is often guided by the 'logic of appropriateness' it is mostly justified by the rational 'logic of consequentiality' (1989: 162). Yet, such an analysis of behaviour seems to be a too easy way out of the – for strong cognitivists – empirical problem that in public discourse states mostly refer to the 'logic of consequentiality'. It must be clear that in many instances – perhaps many more than March and Olsen would be willing to admit – the 'logic of appropriateness' is not the sole or even the most important logic guiding a decision maker's choices. A decision maker asking himself the questions that March and Olsen posited for obligatory action (which is governed by the 'logic of appropriateness') can perfectly well ask at the same time the questions for anticipatory action (which is governed by the 'logic of consequentiality'); the two logics are neither contradictory or mutually exclusive. Decision makers can simultaneously ask "What kind of situation is this? Who am I? How appropriate are different actions for me in this situation?" and "What are my alternatives? What are my values? What are the consequences of my alternatives for my values?" (March and Olsen 1989: 23). In many situations, a decision maker is bound not to "[d]o what is most appropriate" or "[c]hoose the alternative that has the best consequences", but to perhaps check what is appropriate and take that into consideration in a rational cost-benefit analysis of consequences – as would be in line with a rationalist analysis (March and Olsen 1989: 23). A minister of trade taking part in negotiations about trade liberalisation is likely to be a role player *with interests and values* (for instance because he has to take into account the domestic economy and domestic business interests) and as a result will be guided both by the 'logic of appropriateness' and the 'logic of consequentiality'. Another good example would be the meetings of the Council of Ministers of the European Union, where ministers are in a large sense role players and guided by what is considered appropriate behaviour in the European arena. In other words, they follow a 'logic of appropriateness'. Yet, they also have to defend national interests, which will be evaluated using a 'logic of consequentiality'. In fact, we should not be surprised that roles and interests frequently conflict: what is appropriate is not necessarily in a state's interest and if the state feels really strongly about its interests it will put its foot down, disregarding the appropriateness of such an action (as can be seen in the British rebate case).

## Conclusions

This essay has attempted to show first of all that weak cognitivism's opening up of the black box of the processes of state identity and interest formation provides a necessary addendum to realist and neoliberal theories in international regimes. Second, it has argued that, even though strong cognitivism provides a vantage point that should always be taken into account in the analysis of international regimes, it is not so clear that it is a necessary successor to the realist and neoliberal theories – it can perhaps better be seen as a necessary alternative. The foregoing discussion

# Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Rationalism and Cognitivism

Written by Fedor Meerts

points to the dilemma that perhaps “none of these schools of thought alone is capable of capturing all essential dimensions of regimes” – as in a cautiously stated conclusion in *Theories of International Regimes* (Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger 1997: 212). What is needed is not simply an analysis of what determines the roles that state actors play, but also an analysis of interests and behaviour. Here we can see the possibility for a fruitful research program that includes an analysis of roles and socialisation by strong cognitivism as well as an analysis of interests and behaviour by the discussed synthesis of rationalism and weak cognitivism. Most probably, the abovementioned stark differences between rationalist and strong cognitivist ontology, epistemology and methodology preclude a synthesis of these schools of thought. However, interaction between the two schools should not merely be limited to dialogue, which Hasenclever, Mayer and Rittberger seem to consider the highest obtainable good. As has become clear from the discussion of the applicability of the ‘logic of consequentiality’ and the ‘logic of appropriateness’, there is perhaps scope for rationalism and cognitivism to work side by side – in a coordinated fashion – in an attempt to increase our understanding of the creation, maintenance and functioning of international regimes. Even though rationalism and cognitivism provide two very different vantage points to the study of international regimes, there is no reason why they cannot be mutually reinforcing. States that are involved in the creation or maintenance of international regimes could well be argued to be role players that nonetheless have interests and will – often – act in accordance with *both* the ‘logic of appropriateness’ and the ‘logic of consequentiality’; keeping in mind the influences of a rationalist or cognitivist perspective on the study of international regimes, further research is needed to see if and how decision makers balance these two logics.

## References

- Goldstein, J. and R. Keohane. Ideas and Foreign Policy: An Analytical Framework, in Goldstein and Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions, and Political change*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Haas, E. When Knowledge is Power. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
- Haas, P. Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination, in *International Organization* 46 (1), 1992.
- Hasenclever, A., Mayer P., and Rittberger V. *Theories of International Regimes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Krasner, S. Structural causes and regime consequences: regimes as intervening variables, in *International Organization* 36 (2), 1982.
- Kurki, M. Cases of a divided discipline: rethinking the concept of cause in International Relations theory. *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, 2006.
- March, J. and J. Olsen. *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics*. New York: Free Press, 1989.

—

# **Considering Cognitivism's Contribution: Possibilities for Constructive Cooperation between Ra**

Written by Fedor Meerts

*Written by: Fedor Meerts  
Written at: Oxford University  
Written for: Dr R. B. Hall  
Date written: 2007*