Review of International Studies (1999), 25, 123–137 *Copyright © British International Studies Association*

Constructivism within a positivist social science*

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Gil Friedman and Harvey Starr, *Agency, Structure, and International Politics: From Ontology to Empirical Inquiry*, London, Routledge, 1997

Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1996

Constructivism in the study of world politics is little more than a decade old, yet in that short time it has risen to challenge realism and liberalism as a leading approach in international relations. Its ascent has been dramatic. One prominent theorist recently suggested that constructivism has now replaced Marxism as the main paradigmatic rival to realism and liberalism.[1] While this particular judgment might be debated—other scholars may wish to defend the continued relevance of a revived Marxist or socialist approach, for example[2]—the fact remains that constructivism has reshaped many core debates in international relations theory. In the last few years, it has also emerged as a significant force in empirical research. Constructivism was originally a set of largely 'metatheoretical' arguments that identified problems with existing analytical frameworks in the study of world politics and sketched the architecture of a new orientation.[3] The abstractness of these arguments left many observers wondering what this new approach would mean for the practice of empirical research in international relations. Would constructivists introduce new methods and new epistemological standards to empirical inquiry? Would they ask new questions? Was their purpose primarily to turn our attention to long-ignored causal factors and effects in world politics? Or was it to show that the study of these phenomena required new forms of theoretical and historical analysis? Only in the last few years have constructivists carried out the substantive work necessary to answer these fundamental questions. The aim of this review essay is to provide one set of responses from within a positivist social science.

* Research for this article was funded by the Social Science Research Council. I thank Lynn Eden and Andrew Moravcsik for comments.

[1] Stephen M. Walt, 'International Relations: One World, Many Theories', *Foreign Policy* 110 (1998), pp. 29–46.

[2] Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: Norton, 1997).

[3] The most original and important works in these early years were Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie, 'International Organization: A State of the Art on an Art of the State', *International Organization* 40 (1986), pp. 753–75; Alexander Wendt, 'The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory', *International Organization* 41 (1987), pp. 335–70; Friedrich Kratochwil, *Rules, Norms, and Decisions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Nicholas Onuf, *World of Our Making* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989). It was Onuf who introduced the term 'constructivism' to the study of world politics.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001230 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Constructivism as the study of norms and identities

Constructivism is a broad movement in the study of world politics. Its slogan that 'ideas and discourse matter' underpins research in a variety of traditions, including those of postmodernism, feminism, critical theory, and interpretivism.[4] Researchers in the latter traditions, of course, have little or no interest in the project of developing adequate causal accounts of international relations. By contrast, one of the distinguishing features of Gil Friedman's and Harvey Starr's *Agency, Structure and International Politics* and Peter Katzenstein's edited volume, *The Culture of National Security*, is the authors' firm commitment to 'mainstream' research in the study of world politics. Friedman and Starr anchor their argument in a positivist vision of social theory. They contend, among other things, that the interpretivist claims advanced by constructivists such as Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie are 'compatible with a positivist epistemology.'[5] Authors in the Katzenstein volume don't use the term 'positivism,' but they fully endorse the practices of what they call 'mainstream,' 'conventional,' or 'normal' social science. In an introductory overview essay, Ronald Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Katzenstein write, 'This book neither advances nor depends upon any special methodology or epistemology. The arguments it advances are descriptive, or explanatory, or both . . . When [the essays] attempt explanation, they engage in 'normal science,' with its usual desiderata in mind.'[6]

These commitments suggest that, as far as these authors are concerned, constructivist empirical work should be assessed according to positivist standards. Positivists generally work within a realist epistemology, which for social scientists is less a detailed philosophical position (the fine structure of which social scientists are happy to let philosophers work out) than a general framework or set of constraints for answering questions about truth and justification. The political scientists whose work is under review here would very likely recognize and endorse the core beliefs of epistemological realism, which are (1) that we inhabit a world whose nature and existence is neither logically nor causally dependent on any mind; (2) that some of our beliefs about this world are accurate, even if incomplete, descriptions, and thereby qualify as true; and (3) that our methods of inquiry enable us to discover that (at least) some of our beliefs about the world are true.[7] Some social theorists, of course, repudiate this epistemology. Many postmodernists and critical theorists, for instance, deny the existence of a reality logically and causally independent of mind, or reject the possibility that we could ever know the truth about such a reality. These are strong forms of anti-positivism. They generate deep epistemological criticisms of mainstream social research. Those who remain within the ambit of 'normal' science, including the authors under review, disavow this level of critique.

Their commitment to epistemological realism leaves positivists free to debate less fundamental issues of epistemology, such as those concerning the viability of certain inferential methods or the requirements of theory building. Friedman and Starr

[4] For a comprehensive overview, see Emmanuel Adler, 'Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics', *European Journal of International Relations* 3 (1997), pp. 319–63.
[5] *Culture of National Security*, p. 81.
[6] Ibid., p. 65.
[7] This is a standard characterization of 'classic realism', taken from James H. Fetzer and Robert F. Almeder, *Glossary of Epistemology/Philosophy of Science* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), p. 117.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001230 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tackle a number of such issues in their book. The fulcrum of their analysis is the 'agent-structure problem', which denotes the challenge of integrating a theory of agency in international politics with an account of the structure or environment in which agents act. They canvas the vast literature on agency and structure in international relations and analyse the methodological, epistemological, and ontological variants of the agent-structure problem. Their purpose is to identify constraints on acceptable substantive theories of world politics. In part I of the book, the authors cite these constraints to argue that various agent-structure models in international relations theory (such as those developed by Waltz and Wendt) are flawed. They use them also, in part II, to defend their own favoured solution, 'a methodological individualist approach to international politics' that focuses on 'individual elites as the actors in world politics'.[8] Friedman and Starr note that their book is based on 'the premise that the value of metatheoretic deliberations is ultimately realized in their contribution to the conduct of empirical inquiry.'[9] But they offer no discussion of empirical research. In this sense, their work is continuous with that of the early constructivists, who defended particular metatheories of world politics but left open the question of how these abstract analyses would translate into empirical research.

The authors of the essays in *The Culture of National Security*, by contrast, put enormous effort into the task of showing what constructivism means for the conduct of empirical inquiry. In the book's main organizing essay, which is a complex, perceptive, and rewarding analysis of a range of theoretical and philosophical issues in the study of world politics, Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein survey the range of causal mechanisms and effects that various theorists of national security and international relations emphasize in their research. The authors situate these causal patterns in a 2×2 matrix of 'theoretical imageries' in the study of world politics,[10] a schematic summary of which is provided in Figure 1. Along the first axis of this matrix are theories or approaches arrayed according to 'the relative cultural and institutional density of the environments in which actors move'; along the second axis are explanatory accounts ordered by the degree to which they theorize 'the degree of construction of units by environments.'[11] Theories at the low end of the first axis disregard or downplay social and cultural factors in world politics and view material capabilities as the defining characteristic of international structure. They are therefore 'materialist.' Theories at the low end of the second axis theorize structure's influence on the behaviour of actors but ignore the role that structure plays in constructing actor properties. These accounts are 'rationalist'. According to the logic of this schema, neorealism is both materialist and rationalist, and neoliberalism is rationalist but not materialist. Constructivism[12] is the approach that results when both materialism and rationalism are rejected.

[8] Ibid., pp. 85–6.
[9] Ibid., p. 4.
[10] *The Culture of National Security*, p. 38.
[11] Ibid., p. 37, 38.
[12] The authors actually use the term 'sociological institutionalism', which they define as the amalgamation of five approaches (pp. 45–9): 'the English School', 'constructivism', 'poststructuralism' (or 'radical constructivism'), 'feminism', and 'empirical research that has focused on a world political culture', the latter associated most closely with the work of the sociologist John Meyer. However, because the perspectives of the English School, poststructuralism and feminism are not represented in the book's empirical essays, and because constructivism (which the authors do not explicitly define) is not differentiated in principle from sociological world-polity research, the term 'constructivism' seems appropriate for describing the range of approaches exemplified in this volume.

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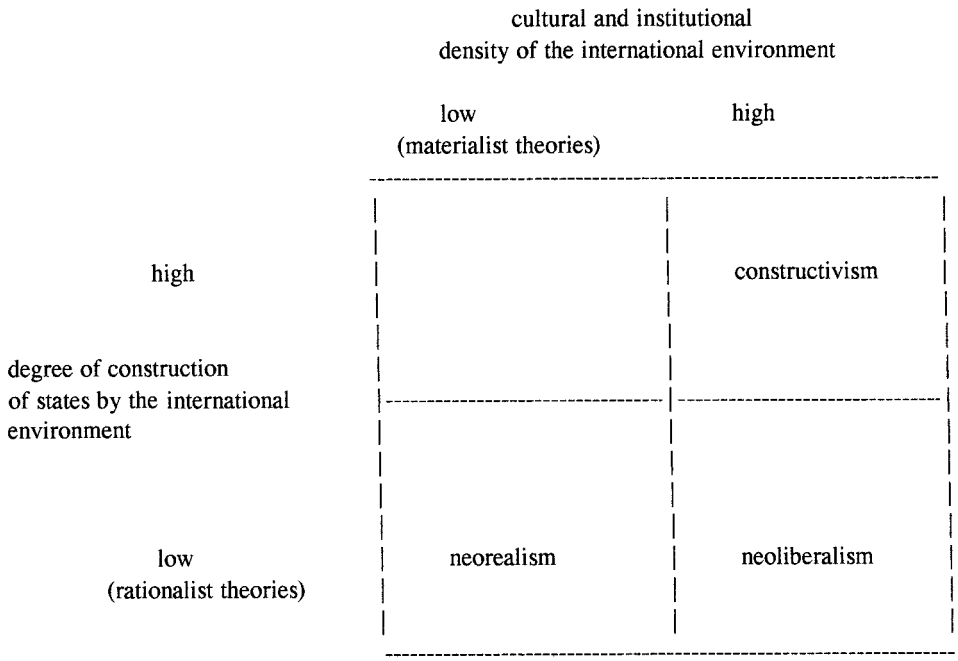


Figure 1. *Theoretical imageries presented in* The Culture of National Security.

Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein characterize the book's nine empirical essays in these terms. According to their argument, constructivists study norms and identities where neorealists and neoliberals are unwilling to do so, and it is this fact that distinguishes constructivist empirical research from its mainstream rivals. However, this argument is problematic because it sets up a questionable dualism between international relations theories that are 'strictly materialist' and those that are 'social-material' in character. Wendt explains this contrast in an earlier work in which he compares neorealist structuralism to its constructivist rival. 'Neorealists think [structure] is made only of a distribution of material capabilities, whereas constructivists think it is also made of social relationships.' For constructivists, Wendt argues, 'social structures include material resources like gold and tanks. In contrast to neorealists' desocialized view of such capabilities, constructivists argue that material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded . . . Material capabilities as such explain nothing; their effects presuppose structures of shared knowledge, which vary and which are not reducible to capabilities.'[13]

This line of argument raises at least two difficulties. First, it is not true that neorealists think structure 'is made only of a distribution of material capabilities.' Recall the fundamental distinction between the *laws* an approach identifies and the *theory* it advances to account for these laws.[14] Neorealism's laws identify recurring relation-

[13] Alexander Wendt, 'Constructing International Politics', *International Security*, 20 (1995), pp. 71–81, at p. 73.

[14] Waltz explains the distinction: 'Laws identify invariant or probable associations. Theories show why those associations obtain'. *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 5.

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ships between such variables as 'the distribution of power' and 'patterns of state behaviour.' These laws are materialist in that they tell us that we should expect new patterns of social interaction when material conditions change. But the *theory* that explains these laws is not strictly materialist. In Waltz's account, international structure is defined not only by material elements, but by *anarchy*, an ordering principle that is as much a part of the 'shared structure of knowledge' in international politics as any of the norms, values, or identities that constructivists emphasize in their explanatory accounts.

Second, and more fundamentally, there is a logical problem with the social/material dualism. The problem results from mixing two quite different schemes for classifying the elements of social life. In one scheme, we categorize social factors according to whether they obey physical laws or not. Factors that obey such laws are termed 'material'; those that don't are labelled 'immaterial'. Gold, for example, is a material object. It has a melting point and it falls under the force of gravity when dropped. The norm of sovereignty, by contrast, is subject to no such physical laws, and hence is considered immaterial. In a second scheme, we determine the degree to which the conception of a material object suggests the existence of the social relationships that give the object its social meaning and significance. Gold can be given a relatively 'desocialized' or naturalistic description ('the element with an atomic number of 79') or a more thickly social one ('a commodity worth several hundred dollars an ounce'). The second of these conceptions implies the existence of many more social relationships, practices, and knowledge (such as markets, prices, and supply and demand) than does the first. To call gold a 'valuable commodity' is to bring it under concepts that are partly constitutive of the structures and practices through which gold acquires its cultural and economic significance. Note that gold is equally material under these two descriptions; what varies is the social 'loading' of the concepts.

These considerations suggest that the categories of 'social' and 'material' do not stand in opposition to one another. The opposite of 'material' is '*im*material', not 'social'. And the obverse of 'social' is 'natural'. It is fair to say, of course, that neorealists emphasize the importance of material capabilities in international relations. But they conceptualize these capabilities in social terms. They describe things like tanks and missiles in a vocabulary that reveals the meaning these objects acquire from the social relationships and understandings in which they are embedded. Thus the 2×2 matrix developed in the organizing essay of *The Culture of National Security*, which sets up a dualism between 'desocialized materialist' theories of world politics on one side and 'social-material' accounts on the other, is unlikely to offer the conceptual leverage needed to understand the relative merits of neorealism, neoliberalism, and constructivism as empirical research programs. In the next section of this article, an alternative classificatory scheme will be developed. Recall that the authors whose works are under review here declare their allegiance to 'normal' science. What precisely does this commitment entail? What kinds of constructivist research can be pursued within mainstream science? What basic epistemological principles do constructivists share with the neorealists and neoliberals whose theories they so vigorously criticize? To answer these questions we need to look more closely at the structure of positivist social science.

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Explanatory strategies in a positivist social science

As explained above, positivism is rooted in a realist epistemology. So are some non-positivist approaches to social inquiry, including the analyses of many interpretivists and historians. What distinguishes positivism from these alternatives is the constraints positivists place on the concept of *explanation*. The main requirement is that an explanation establish the phenomenon it explains as something that was to be expected in the circumstances where it occurred. Carl Hempel calls this constraint the 'requirement of explanatory relevance'. Information is explanatory, he writes, only if it 'affords good grounds for believing that the phenomenon to be explained does, or did, indeed occur. This condition must be met if we are to be entitled to say: "That explains it—the phenomenon in question was indeed to be expected under the circumstances!"'[15] Such information will necessarily include one or more laws, since without a knowledge of regularities and recurring patterns in the world, we would have no reason to expect particular happenings at particular times. Thus positivist explanation is 'nomic', or reliant on laws. Hempel concludes that 'all scientific explanation . . . seeks to provide a systematic understanding of empirical phenomena by showing that they fit into a nomic nexus'.[16]

A simple example illustrates the logic of positivist explanation. Suppose we wish to explain the observed rise of mercury in a thermometer at a particular place and time. To do so, we must adduce information that enables us to see this event as something that was to be expected in the circumstances that prevailed. For example, we might point to the thermometer's immersion in hot water (initial conditions) and cite the regularity that mercury expands when heated (a law). The regularity tells us that we should expect the mercury to rise in *any* thermometer that is heated. The initial conditions establish that *this particular* thermometer was, at the given time and place, heated. The law and the initial conditions together offer conclusive reasons (through the logic of deduction) for believing that the mercury in the thermometer did in fact rise at this time. Insofar as the mercury's rise is expected, it is explained.

This explanatory logic distinguishes positivism from other forms of empirical, realist social science. Interpretivists, for instance, define explanation in terms of *intelligibility* rather than expectability. An interpretivist explanation is achieved when the strange is made familiar, or when phenomena are brought under appropriate concepts. William Dray defends an interpretivist position in arguing that historians often 'explain by concepts' when they find 'a satisfactory *classification* of what seems to require explanation.' Dray gives the example of a historian who explains large-scale economic and institutional change in late 18th century England by bringing it under the concept of 'social revolution'. For positivists, such information is unlikely to meet the requirement of explanatory relevance. Collecting a set of social developments under a particular label may help us make sense of these developments and perhaps see new meanings in them, but it does not ordinarily show that these phenomena were to be expected. Thus Hempel concludes that the account of Dray's historian 'would seem to provide a very vague description rather than any explanation'.[17]

[15] Hempel, *Philosophy of Natural Science* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 48.
[16] Carl Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* (New York: Free Press, 1965), p. 488.
[17] Hempel discusses Dray's argument in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation*, pp. 453–7.

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The positivist model yields two distinct research strategies for the explanation of events. The first is a *generalizing* strategy, according to which researchers treat the event to be explained as an instance of a certain *type* of event, which is then shown to accompany or follow regularly from conditions of a specified kind. The example of the thermometer immersed in warm water, where the rise in mercury is explained by showing it is just the *kind* of event one would expect under the circumstances, illustrates this explanatory approach. An example in the study of world politics is Jack Snyder's account of why the Cold War's end was peaceful. He argues that 'a state's foreign policy is shaped by the myths it holds about how to achieve security'. Expansionist myths (which hold that a state's security is enhanced by aggressive expansion) are held in check in democracies but can 'run rampant' in polities that feature logrolling among highly concentrated interest groups. The state's domestic political structure, in turn, is shaped by the timing of its industrialization. Note that these are all type-level generalizations; to use them to explain Russia's peaceful acquiescence at the end of the Cold War, we must describe the concrete conditions of that case. According to Snyder, Russia's historic economic backwardness shaped Soviet political modernization, which in turn created a political constituency for a foreign policy of peace and international economic integration. This constituency developed the legitimating ideas needed to mobilize support for the policy, and these ideas were determinative at the Cold War's end. The laws and initial conditions set forth in this account suggest that the peaceful collapse of the Soviet empire was, while unprecedented, something to be expected, under the circumstances. The event is in this way explained.[18]

The second strategy is a *particularizing* one, in which the researcher explains an event by detailing the sequence of happenings leading up to it. In this approach, which aims at accurate historical reconstruction, there is no attempt to place the phenomenon in question into a larger class. The event is explained as the end-point of a concrete historical sequence, not as an instance of a particular type. In Hempel's words, this type of explanation 'presents the phenomenon under study as the final stage of a developmental sequence, and accordingly accounts for the phenomenon by describing the successive stages of that sequence'.[19] Like a generalizing or covering-law account, a particularizing or reconstructive explanation necessarily relies upon laws, but these are *component* laws rather than covering ones, in that each pertains to only a segment of the pathway leading up to the event, and there is 'no overall law which . . . links the final stage of the process immediately to the initial one'.[20] Like any sound positivist explanation, reconstructive accounts explain by showing that the event in question was to be expected in the circumstances in which it occurred.

William Wohlforth's account of the Soviet Union's peaceful collapse exemplifies the reconstructive approach.[21] Wohlforth does not attempt to 'cover' Soviet

[18] 'Myths, Modernization, and the Post-Gorbachev World', in Richard Ned Lebow and Thomas Risse-Kappen (eds.), *International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 109–26. The quote is from pp. 109–10.

[19] Hempel, *Aspects*, p. 447. Hempel labels this type of explanation 'genetic'. It should be noted that by 'developmental' in this context Hempel is referring to a *concrete* sequence of events, described in its uniqueness (i.e. with proper names and references to actual times and places), rather than to a type-level pathway that shows how certain *kinds* of events unfold in recurrent sequences.

[20] Ibid., p. 453.

[21] 'Realism and the End of the Cold War', *International Security*, 19 (1994–5), pp. 91–129.

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behaviour with type-level generalizations that show it to be the kind of behaviour we would expect in the circumstances. Rather, he details the sequence of events leading up to Soviet collapse, and shows how the behaviour to be explained emerges from it. In the early 1980s, Wohlforth argues, Soviet economic decline and geopolitical vulnerability brought the issue of reform to the fore of Soviet policymaking. New ideas for change in foreign and domestic policy began to percolate up to the top leadership. Under Gorbachev, starting in 1985, reform was a trial-and-error learning process that brought Soviet leaders new evidence of the USSR's perilous situation. These leaders made concessions to the West in arms control negotiations between 1986 and 1988 in the hope that decreased international tension and lowered security costs would shore up the Soviet position. And so on. Wohlforth's reconstruction explains the USSR's peaceful collapse by showing it to be the expected 'last step' in the concrete sequence. This expectation emerges from the logic of the narrative, itself filled with contingency as well as predictability.

These two strategies, and the explanations they yield, are equally positivist, yet they lead to quite different ways of framing questions in research. In the generalizing or covering-law approach, an event is identified, and the researcher asks: what is this a case of? The logic of inquiry proceeds 'outward' from the consideration of single events to the analysis of classes of events. In the particularizing or reconstructive approach, the researcher asks of the event to be explained: from what concrete historical pathway did this event emerge? Inquiry then moves 'inward' to a detailed reconstruction of the actual sequences, causal conjunctions, and contingencies that led, step by step, to the outcome in question.

Positivist social scientists generally champion the generalizing approach to explanation at the expense of its particularizing alternative. This is apparent not only in extant patterns of empirical research, but in arguments advanced in the associated literature on methods and research design.[22] For example, Jack Snyder identifies the covering-law strategy as a constitutive element of positivism. 'Positivists state their hypotheses in the form of "if, then" generalizations. They seek to explain individual events by identifying "if, then" generalizations, or covering laws, that match the pattern of those events'.[23] Similarly, Friedman and Starr write: 'We take the nomothetic, or covering-law, model of explanation to be the defining property of positivism'.[24] The foregoing account of positivism, however, makes clear that these characterizations are one-sided. To accept covering laws as explanatory is to endorse the principles underpinning reconstructive explanation as well. Social scientists lean heavily on the work of the positivist philosophers of science who defined the criteria that generalizing explanations must meet. What deserves emphasis is that these very philosophers also showed that particularizing explanations meet the same criteria.[25]

[22] An important exception is the work of Alexander George. For example, see Alexander George and Timothy McKeown, 'Case Studies and Theory of Organizational Decision-Making', *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations* 2 (1985), pp. 21–58.

[23] 'Science and Sovietology: Bridging the Methods Gap in Soviet Foreign Policy Studies', *World Politics* 41 (1988), pp. 169–93, at p. 171.

[24] *Agency, Structure*, p. 66.

[25] For example, Snyder ["Richness, Rigor, and Relevance in the Study of Soviet Foreign Policy', *International Security*, 9 (1984–5), pp. 89–108, esp. p. 91] and Friedman and Starr (p. 66) cite Ernest Nagel's *The Structure of Science* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961) in support of their claim that positivists explain only by covering laws. In this book, however, Nagel writes: '[C]ritics of what has come to be called the 'covering law' model of explanation . . . are undoubtedly correct in

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Constructivism within the mainstream of international relations research

How are we to position the empirical contributions of constructivism within the framework of positivist social science? Friedman and Starr, who are fully committed to positivism, are concerned primarily to clarify the conceptual foundations of empirical research. 'Just as agency and structure are inextricably and ineluctably entwined as jointly necessary components of explanation and understanding', they write, 'so are metatheory and substantive theory'. Their aim is to strike a 'balance between metatheory and substantive-theoretic focus'.[26] On the whole, however, their analysis tilts heavily toward the metatheoretical side. Appealing solely to ontological and epistemological criteria of theory assessment, Friedman and Starr argue for the superiority of their favoured solution to the agent-structure problem over the frameworks advanced by other international relations theorists. Their effort is a thoughtful and serious contribution to the literature on agency and structure in international relations; at the same time, it serves as a reminder of the limits of metatheoretical critique. With constructivists now producing a significant stream of empirical research, we need a framework for assessing it in relation to the work of neorealists and neoliberals. Positivism provides one possible structure for this task.

In the last section of this essay, it was noted that positivists have two explanatory strategies open to them in empirical research, one generalizing, the other particularizing. Neorealism and neoliberalism are firmly rooted in the generalizing approach. Their proponents seek covering laws of such phenomena as war, revolution, deterrence, cooperation, alliance formation, and economic integration. They also seek, in explaining these laws, to ground theory in an instrumental conception of human rationality. Here we confront the familiar split between 'economic' and 'sociological' approaches to the study of social and political behaviour.[27] In Max Weber's influential formulation, rational social conduct falls into two categories, 'goal-oriented' and 'value-related'. Economic models explain the first of these types, in which behaviour is *instrumentally rational*. In this mode, an actor's choices are 'based on the expectation that objects in the external situation or other human individuals will behave in a certain way', and these expectations are used 'as "conditions" or "means" for the successful achievement of the individual's own rationally chosen goals'. Sociological models, on the other hand, view action as *value-rational*, where choices follow from beliefs actors have about 'the absolute worth of [their] conduct, as such, independent of any ulterior motive and measured by some such standard as ethics, esthetics or religion'. Both types of action are rational, but their orientation differs: in the former, actors strive toward rationally calculated goals; in the latter, they seek to realize values, rooted (at least in part) in aesthetic or moral belief.[28]

Influential exemplars of mainstream realist and liberal research—for example, Waltz's systemic theory, Snyder's work on great power overexpansion, Stephen Walt's analysis of alliances, and Robert Keohane's account of institutions and

claiming that historical explanations of aggregative events do not exhibit this pattern' (p. 570). And: 'Collective events that are appreciably complex are thus not usually explained by subsuming them as single units under abstract concepts appearing in generalizations' (p. 574).

[26] *Agency, Structure*, p. 141.

[27] *Culture of National Security*, pp. 28–9, 37–42, 456–61, 527–8.

[28] Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1962), pp. 59–62.

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cooperation[29]—develop covering-law accounts grounded in theories that presume instrumentally rational behaviour on the part of the actors under study. In these accounts, actors in world politics (primarily states) are seen as connecting means to ends in ways that best satisfy their rationally calculated objectives. Various forms of sociological institutionalism, on the other hand, including John Meyer's work on the cultural foundations of world society,[30] explain conduct as value-rational. Meyer and his colleagues account for the global spread of market models, democratic ideologies, and notions of citizenship and human rights, among other developments, according to a behavioural model in which, as Weber characterized it, 'the meaning of the conduct does not lie in the achievement of some goal ulterior to it, but in engaging in the specific type of behaviour for its own sake.'[31]

Neorealists and neoliberals, then, pursue an explanatory strategy that is (a) aimed to develop covering-law theory and (b) based on models of instrumental rationality. Critics who believe that 'spare' forms of neorealism and neoliberalism are inadequate, and who wish to pursue a research program that attends more closely than these accounts do to ideational and normative factors in world politics, have three options open to them within a positivist social science. First, they might accept the underlying explanatory strategy and use it to develop new covering-law theories that recognize the workings of a wider range of cultural and ideational elements in world politics. Second, they might retain the goal of generalization, but seek to develop theory based on sociological, or value-rational, models of human behaviour, rather than economic ones. And third, they might pursue reconstructive research that focuses on the development and effects of particular norms, identities, and other cultural factors in world politics. These options are summarized in Figure 2.

Those who pursue the first option would probably not label their work constructivist, though their purpose is to show that ideas and discourse matter. Snyder's work on the myths of empire, in which he argues that a state's foreign policy is shaped by strategic myths or ideologies, fits into this category.[32] Walt's balance of threat theory similarly illustrates how the influence of ideas and perceptions in international politics can be factored into a mainstream realist account.[33] Some constructivists have suggested that Walt's and Snyder's work represents a significant break with mainstream realism. Katzenstein writes, 'As is true of Snyder's work, Walt's threat theory is not a minor modification of neorealism but a substantial departure from it', at least in part because it 'shifts analysis from material capabilities to ideational factors'.[34] But as explained in the first section of this essay, theories that emphasize the influence of material factors in social life (as neorealism does) necessarily presume the existence of social relationships and structures, and theorists who explicitly bring ideational or normative factors into this mix (as Walt and Snyder do) are building on the latter. Indeed, if the problem with neorealism is that it attributes to actors in world politics ideas, motivations, and shared expect-

[29] Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[30] See, for example, George W. Thomas, John W. Meyer, Francisco O. Ramirez, and John Boli, *Institutional Structure: Constituting the State, Society, and the Individual* (London: Sage, 1987).

[31] Weber, *Basic Concepts in Sociology*, p. 60.

[32] Snyder, *Myths of Empire*.

[33] Walt, *Origins of Alliances*.

[34] *Culture of National Security*, p. 27.

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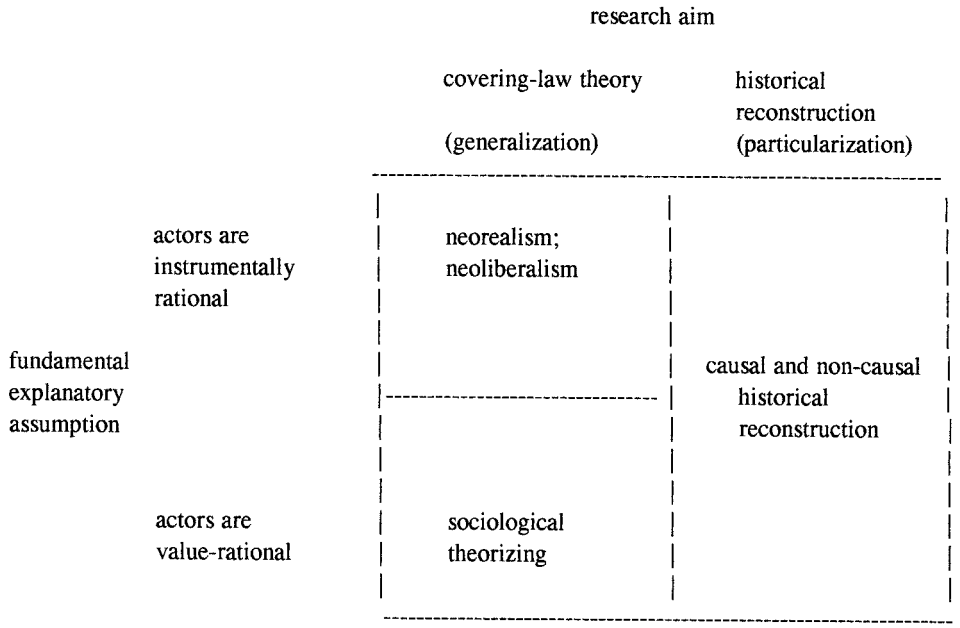


Figure 2. *Categories of research in positivist social science.*

ations that are only implicitly and arbitrarily introduced,[35] then Walt and Snyder are moving in precisely the direction that constructivists recommend: they are theorizing some of these immaterial factors. What makes their work essentially an evolution of, rather than departure from, neorealism is their shared commitment to neorealism's explanatory strategy of producing covering-law theory grounded in the assumption of instrumental rationality.

The second and third targets of positivist research depicted in Figure 1—generalization on the basis of value-rational models, and particularization through historical reconstruction—indicate the directions taken by the substantive chapters of *The Culture of National Security*. These nine essays are carefully argued, intensively researched, and generally well-written. They provide fresh perspectives on a diverse array of topics including the determinants of military and strategic doctrine, the historical evolution of international norms, the spread of conventional weaponry, the end of the Cold War, and the dynamics of alliance politics. Each balances empirical, theoretical, and metatheoretical analysis in an informative way. As explained below, these chapters do not necessarily represent fully developed exemplars of reconstructive or value-rational generalizing research, but they do illustrate the initial steps toward such goals, and by extrapolating these research trajectories we can get a clearer sense of constructivism's place within the mainstream of international relations research.

The chapter by Dana Eyre and Mark Suchman provides a clear example of empirical work that is generalizing but based in sociological, rather than economic,

[35] Ibid., p. 40.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001230 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theorizing. The authors explain the proliferation of advanced conventional arms to the developing world over the last few decades 'as part of the more general, world-level *cultural* processes that have given rise to the modern nation-state'.[36] They argue that models of instrumental rationality, which view proliferation as 'the result of rational calculation by actors in pursuit of their own self-interest', cannot explain this phenomenon. Eyre and Suchman advance a value-rational explanation according to which 'weapons spread not because of a match between their technical capabilities and national security needs but because of the highly symbolic, normative nature of militaries and their weaponry'.[37] They conclude with a statistical analysis of the proliferation of individual weapon types to the developing world between 1970 and 1990.

Several other essays in the book similarly claim that models of value-rational behavior can explain phenomena that theories of economic rationality cannot. Thomas Risse-Kappen argues that disputes within the Atlantic alliance during the 1956 Suez crisis and the 1962 Cuban missile crisis cannot be explained as 'a conflict of interests alone', but are 'better understood in the framework of norm-guided behaviour, as a dispute over obligations and appropriate behaviour in a security community'.[38] Elizabeth Kier shows that interwar French military doctrine can be explained only by taking into account the French military's organizational culture, which worked as an interpretive filter and rendered some of the military's policy options, even instrumentally rational ones, 'conceptually impossible'.[39] Michael Barnett takes up the question of alliance politics in the Middle East, disputing 'the neorealist view that the choice of the alliance partner is largely dependent on a rational calculation of costs and benefits',[40] and exploring the role that identity plays in processes of threat construction and alliance formation among Middle Eastern states. Robert Herman uses an 'ideas and identity framework' to argue that Soviet 'New Thinking' under Gorbachev resulted from 'cognitive evolution and policy entrepreneurship by networks of Western-oriented in-system reformers' in the USSR who reformulated Soviet interests and identity through a process that theories of economic rationality cannot grasp.[41]

However, with the exception of the chapter by Eyre and Suchman, none of the book's essays develops a value-rational covering-law account that might be tested against neorealist and neoliberal rivals. Some authors do take the first steps toward such an account. Alastair Iain Johnston draws from his empirical analysis of Chinese strategic culture three possible models for depicting the relationship between ideas and structure in the international system.[42] Thomas Berger, in a study of the changing identity of Germany and Japan over the last half century, suggests that the core principles of a nation's political-military culture may change following external 'shocks' that persuade the state's leaders that their defence and security policies have been a failure.[43] Such ideas might be developed into covering-law theories that can

[36] Ibid., p. 82, original emphasis.
[37] Ibid., p. 86.
[38] Ibid., p. 379.
[39] Ibid., p. 209.
[40] Ibid., p. 410.
[41] Ibid., p. 273.
[42] Ibid., pp. 265–6.
[43] Ibid., pp. 330–1, 356.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001230 Published online by Cambridge University Press

be tested against an appropriate range of historical cases. Berger's work, for example, could lead to a theory that identifies the conditions under which we can expect the transformation of a state's political-military culture. Paul Kowert and Jeffrey Legro, in a 'theoretical reprise' that constitutes the book's penultimate chapter, call for this sort of work when they urge constructivists 'to take their own criticisms seriously and to develop more explicitly theoretical propositions about the construction of sociopolitical facts'.[44] Toward this goal, these authors sketch three frameworks through which constructivists might develop a 'generalizable theory' of the development of norms and identities in world politics.[45]

Of course, no one should indict the empirical chapters in *The Culture of National Security* for not offering covering-law theories. It would be a mistake to interpret the *preliminary steps* toward theory these constructivists take as a *failure* to theorize—as if every leg of a long journey should be judged a failure simply because it does not take us all the way to our destination. At the same time, the challenges facing constructivists should not be underestimated. As value-rational theories are developed, their advocates will have to confront the problem of fitting them with instrumentally rational accounts. Most constructivists are careful to preserve a place for economic rationalism in their accounts. But how are the economic and sociological modes of theorizing to be combined? Their relationship varies from directly adversarial to complementary. Several authors suggest how economic and sociological models might be united in a single analysis, perhaps by nesting one within the other (as Kier does by placing the value-rationality of domestic cultural concerns within a framework of causes that work through instrumental rationality), or by putting one 'in front of' the other so that the first explains what the second takes as exogenous (as Barnett does in using the politics of identity to explain threat construction, a process neorealists don't theorize but must take as given to get their analyses going). Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein offer a useful summary of the various relations of complementarity and competition that may obtain between different lines of theorizing,[46] but their insights are not further developed in the book.

A final issue raised by *The Culture of National Security* concerns not theory *per se*, but its standing in relation to history. Two chapters in the book might be read primarily as efforts in particularizing historical reconstruction. Richard Price and Nina Tannenwald trace the development of 'taboos' against the use of chemical and nuclear weapons by showing how particular social and cultural meanings have been attached to these weapons since their introduction. Martha Finnemore tracks the evolution of the norm of humanitarian intervention from its tentative emergence in the early 19th century through its expansion and consolidation into an institutionalized, multilateral form by the close of the 20th century. These essays, like the others in the book, identify weaknesses in neorealism and neoliberalism. Unlike the others, however, these two focus primarily on reconstructing the long-term historical pathways leading to important outcomes in world politics. In neither analysis is the phenomenon of interest shown to be expected as the terminus in its pathway, and thus neither offers explanation in the Hempelian sense. From a positivist perspective,

[44] Ibid., p. 469.
[45] Ibid., pp. 470–73.
[46] Ibid., pp. 68–72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001230 Published online by Cambridge University Press

each must be viewed as a non-causal historical reconstruction. One might use such work as the departure point for the development of covering-law theory, which Finnemore calls for at the end of her essay.[47] Another possibility, which Price and Tannenwald prefigure in their concluding comments about the importance of 'contingency and luck' in history,[48] is to develop these non-causal accounts into causal reconstructions that explain in a fully positivist way but do so without invoking generalizing, type-level theory.

This second possibility suggests the need for explicit discussion of the relative merits of generalizing and particularizing research. As explained earlier, reconstructive explanations have the same epistemic standing within a positivist science as covering-law accounts do. Unfortunately, the wide influence of the covering-law model has obscured this point and led to the depreciation of reconstructive work in social science. The question that needs to be confronted here is that of the relative *value* we place on these two different products of science. The issue is an old one. Weber defined the cultural sciences as 'those disciplines which analyse the phenomena of life in terms of their cultural significance'.[49] He argued against the pursuit of what we now call covering-law theory by asserting that laws fail to convey the meaning and significance of social life. 'Meaningfulness naturally does not coincide with laws as such, and the more general the law the less the coincidence. For the specific meaning which a phenomenon has for us is naturally *not* to be found in those relationships which it shares with many other phenomena'.[50] Weber's point concerned not the *possibility* but the *desirability* of covering-law theory. 'In the cultural sciences', he wrote, 'the knowledge of the universal or the general is never valuable in itself'.[51] Particularizing knowledge is thus the proper goal of social science, in Weber's view.

Of course, many positivists would disagree with Weber's conclusion. The point is not to referee the issue here, but simply to emphasize its importance. Constructivists have turned our attention to norms, values, and identities in political life. These features mark out and give shape to the complex topology of meaning and significance in world politics. We are certainly free to bring such elements into covering-law theories aimed to explain recurring patterns. But we may also wish to develop reconstructive explanations that reveal the development and impact of norms and identities *in their particularity*, so that diverse actors in world politics can better answer such fundamental questions as 'who are we?' and 'what do we stand for?'. In this way a positivist science might contribute directly to debates over meaning and purpose in international political life, a possibility that remains largely unrealized as long as science is confined to the development of covering-law theory. The issue here concerns less the epistemology of social science than its social relevance. Walt suggests that the policy relevance of realism and liberalism is secured by the fact that 'disagreements about policy usually rest on more fundamental disagreements about the basic forces that shape international outcomes'.[52] This diagnosis invites the

[47] Ibid., p. 185.
[48] Ibid., p. 152.
[49] Weber, '"Objectivity" in Social Science and Social Policy', in Edward Shils and Henry Finch (trans.), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: Free Press, 1949), pp. 50–112, at p. 76.
[50] Ibid., pp. 76–7, original emphasis.
[51] Ibid., p. 80.
[52] Walt, 'One World, Many Theories', p. 29.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210599001230 Published online by Cambridge University Press

development of covering-law theory focused on the general forces at work in international politics. Katzenstein, by contrast, argues that 'the current confusions about the purposes motivating American foreign policy [are] rooted . . . in the confusion about American identity'.[53] This analysis leads naturally to reconstructive work, in this case focused on the American experience.[54] The turning of our attention to the possibilities of a social science that balances the goals of generalization and particularization may yet prove to be one of constructivism's most enduring contributions.

[53] Katzenstein, *Culture of National Security*, p. 500.
[54] Ernest R. May, "Who are We?': Two Centuries of American Foreign Relations', *Foreign Affairs* 73 (1994), pp. 134–8.

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