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On the Via Media: a response to the critics

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Can the study of ideas in international politics be made scientifically respectable? The question is central to the Third Debate, yet the dominant voices in the 'debate' seem oddly to agree. 'Positivists' are sceptical because ideas seem ephemeral, difficult to measure, and generally resistant to hard science. As a result, positivist theories of international politics tend to favour seemingly more objective material factors like military and economic capabilities, and only bring in ideas as a last resort. In this way positivist epistemology shapes international ontology. Against this tendency, 'post-positivists' argue that it is simply a mistake to think that ideas can or should be studied in the same way we study physical objects. Ontology should determine epistemology, not *vice versa*. However, in developing this important insight many post-positivists have gone further, to efface any connection between their subsequent work and science—Understanding *versus* Explanation. The ironic result is to echo the positivist feeling that the study of ideas cannot be made scientifically respectable.

The 'via media' seeks a path between these positions by arguing that while the ideational aspect of human social life has important implications for international politics, these do not include a rejection of 'science'. Of course, in the end whether the study of ideas is made scientifically respectable will depend on whether ideas are studied scientifically, i.e., on rigorous substantive theorizing about the empirical world. Since that is hard enough to do already, however, all the more reason to remove unnecessary *philosophical* barriers to such inquiry. My goal in *Social Theory* was to clear some of that ground, and show that this mattered for thinking about international politics. After reading these generous but challenging reviews I see there is still a long way to go. As such, I am grateful to the contributors to this forum, and to the RIS editors who made it possible, for this opportunity to push a little farther.

Given the partial overlap among the reviews, it seems useful to organize the discussion thematically rather than by individual author. Of the five, Hayward Alker's essay is by design less a critique than a set of excellent suggestions for further work, so given space constraints I shall say relatively less about it. I address ten issues altogether, and as in the book, distinguish issues of social theory from issues of international politics. Most of the questions raised by the authors merit much deeper consideration than is possible in this short essay. My goal here therefore is only to help get the discussion off the ground, not to try to refute the contributors' points.

Issues of social theory

I address three issues each of ontology and epistemology.

Confusion and contradiction

Perhaps the most worrisome ontological problem suggested by these reviews, emphasized to especially good effect by Steve Smith, is that my description of the relationship between material conditions and ideas is confusing, inconsistent, and contradictory. I agree my treatment is incomplete, but as for confusing, I don't think the position I am trying to defend is all that counter-intuitive. Some may criticize it as 'Cartesian' because it holds that ideas and material conditions are distinct and separable kinds of stuff ('mind and body'), but even so, this should not be taken to imply a 'dichotomy' between which we must choose. After all, consciousness (the ultimate seat of ideas) is part of nature and thus supervenes on the material world described by the laws of physics; as such I find entirely congenial John Searle's non- or post-Cartesian view of the mind/body relationship as quoted by Alker. Whatever 'idealism' is to mean, therefore, it must be consistent with physicalism about the universe, suggesting the futility of the 'dichotomy' approach. On the other hand, it is unlikely that we will ever be able to reduce folk psychology (mind) to brain science (body), or for that matter even brain science to physics, which suggests that there are also emergent phenomena at different levels of nature that require distinct theories and vocabularies. To that extent ideas cannot be reduced to material conditions. Thus, in contrast to the usual depiction of the base-superstructure relationship as a 'pyramid', I see it more as an 'inverted' pyramid. Rather than a tight constraint, the relationship of base to superstructure is usually 1: many, a variety of cultural forms being compatible with a given set of material conditions. *How* many is an empirical question that cannot be answered in the abstract. But my orienting assumption is that in most cases the relationship is sufficiently loose that starting with culture will be a fruitful strategy.

That said, the point of the 'rump materialism' argument is that material conditions do have at least two constitutive effects on their own, independent of ideas, which enthusiasts for the significance of culture should not ignore. The first is to define physical limits of possibility, even if human ingenuity makes these limits changeable over time. This has both constraining and enabling aspects: because of the state of their technology the Romans could not deal with recalcitrant states by bombing them safely from a distance; the United States sometimes can. This possibility does not depend on ideas, even if it does not by itself determine that the United States will act on it. The second constitutive effect is to help define the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action. This effect is not exclusive, since ideas also affect costs and benefits, but so do material conditions. The German invasion of Poland in 1939 was caused largely by ideas, but the material advantage enjoyed by the Germans was an important factor about the situation: given their aggressive intentions, it made it easier, and therefore more likely, for the Germans to invade. However, in acknowledging the independent effects of material conditions it is also important not to lose sight of the discursive conditions that invest them with *meaning*. Germany today probably enjoys a comparable preponderance over Poland as in 1939, but there is almost no possibility of an invasion now, largely because of a different distribution of ideas. Sometimes ideas will override material conditions altogether. Despite material incentives the Polish cavalry charged the German tanks. But even in this extreme case of determination by ideas, there were materially

constituted costs: the Polish cavalry was destroyed. Again, it is not ideas *all* the way down. Treating ideas and material conditions as separate but inevitably linked phenomena is a way of disentangling their respective effects. This argument also shows how material conditions can be both independent and dependent variables. It depends on what question we are asking. If we are interested in how material conditions constitute possibilities or costs and benefits then they serve as an independent variable; if we are interested in how actors give those conditions meaning, and thus what they do with them, they become a dependent variable. Both questions are important.

Windmills and caricatures

Perhaps I overestimate the power of crude materialism in IR. Certainly there are today relatively few students of biological, geographical, or technological determinism in our discipline,[1] and probably even fewer 'true blue' neorealists. Nor, in any case, is there any evidence that Waltz himself set out to perpetrate 'materialism'; the term hardly figures in his work. Have I become fixated on a non-problem? Yet, whether intended to advance a materialist worldview or not, Waltz's definition of 'structure' as coming down to the distribution of material capabilities has been enormously influential. Ask most contemporary IR scholars how they would conceptualize the structure of the international system, and they will reflexively say 'distribution of capabilities'; it has become part of the common sense of the field. While agreeing that material capabilities are important, my basic goal in the book was to rethink this crucial concept of structure in more cultural terms, in the belief that focusing on power alone leads to an unnecessarily pessimistic view of international politics. I showed that highlighting the cultural aspect of structure suggests new possibilities for change in the international system, and, incidentally, ways of tapping into the significant theoretical resources of sociology and allied disciplines, where structure is understood in more social terms. Given that objective, calling attention to Waltz's (and IR's) at least tacit 'materialism' seems to make sense.

Whatever the proper interpretation of Neorealism, however, Keohane is right to point out that it would be a caricature to say that the classical realism of Morgenthau, Carr, and Wolfers, their contemporary off-shoots,[2] and also the misnamed neoliberalism, are materialist in the pure, Waltzian sense. Certainly they are not. But keep in mind that materialism is part of a spectrum rather than a well defined point. In the Marxist tradition, where these debates were played out with considerable sophistication 20 years ago,[3] various forms of materialism are recognized, from 'fundamentalist' to 'relative autonomy of the superstructure'. What

[1] Too few I would say, although in the literature on the 'offence-defence balance' the field has a foothold in the latter.

[2] Arguably including myself; in the book (p. 33) I noted particular affinities to Wolfers.

[3] See, for example, Stuart Hall, 'Re-thinking the "Base-and-Superstructure" Metaphor', in J. Bloomfield (ed.), *Class, Hegemony, and Party* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 43–71; Paul Hirst, 'Economic Classes and Politics', in A. Hunt (ed.), *Class and Class Structure* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), pp. 125–54; and G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

makes them all Marxist (historical materialist) is a pyramid-style approach to thinking about base and superstructure, but within that frame they differ considerably on how tightly material conditions are thought to constrain ideas. So it is with classical realism and neoliberalism. They differ importantly from neorealism in the significance they attach to ideas, but as in structural Marxism's 'relative autonomy' thesis, classical realists or neoliberals often seem to be saying that, in the end, after all is said and done, albeit perhaps after a considerable lag, changes in the distribution of material capabilities are the primary determinant of international politics. The image remains one of a pyramid. Perhaps in distancing himself from the term 'materialism' Keohane means to reject this image in favour of a more idealist, inverted pyramid. Indeed it may be unfair to compare neoliberalism to structural Marxism, although Carr himself long ago drew an analogy between his own sophisticated form of classical realism and Marxism. Part of the interpretive difficulty is that classical realists and neoliberals alike have tended to neglect ontological issues and so their views on the relationship of material forces to ideas have remained mostly tacit and underdeveloped. Perhaps by thinking self-consciously about materialism, and the parallels between Marxism and realism, these issues may become clearer.

The wrong question

This relates to a third problem, also emphasized by Keohane, which is that my discussion of material and ideational highlights the wrong question. It is not 'what matters more?', but rather, 'how does the intersection of the two produce the outcomes we observe?' I agree very strongly with Keohane that the second question is the important one for students of international politics. At the level of concrete research the relative weight of material and ideational will seldom be the most interesting question, since its answer will vary from case to case. To be sure, if idealists are right then it may be that in the aggregate ideas explain 'more of the variance' than material forces (if such a comparison could be made sensible), but this is not the kind of issue one settles by aggregating the results of empirical studies. The relative weight question is important primarily at the level of ontology, of the *a priori* commitments that structure how we approach the empirical world. In reducing structure to the distribution of power Waltz was implicitly giving one answer to the question (material is 'more important'), which in turn justifies a particular positive heuristic ('start with material forces and only add ideas if necessary'), and thereby leads to certain kinds of theory and empirical research. My argument against that view is intended to persuade the reader that a different starting point, one putting ideas in the foreground, would be more fruitful. Case studies can do relatively little to settle this argument, although they are certainly useful for rhetorical purposes. Given how deeply ontological commitments structure our thinking, the case for relative weight has to be made at a theoretical and philosophical level. Once having made some choices at that level, however, the issue of relative weight is no longer so pressing. Since idealists and materialists alike will inevitably have to consider both factors, what we need to know is how they are articulated in particular situations, not what matters more.

Yet, in thinking about this question of articulation, there is one sense in which the question of relative weight remains important even in concrete cases. It is a common problem in materialist analyses for material forces to be attributed with intrinsic meanings and causal powers that in fact they enjoy only in virtue of the contingent social relations in which they are embedded. In neorealism, for example, which I argued trades on an implicit treatment of anarchy as a Lockean culture, different distributions of power are imbued with universal causal implications which would actually be quite different in a Hobbesian or Kantian culture. To that extent neorealism 'fetishizes' the distribution of power (another concern addressed in Marxist theory), building socio-cultural relations tacitly into its conceptualization of material objects.[4] It is through such a conflation of material with ideational that 'materialism' gains much of its plausibility, and in the process helps to naturalize or reify existing social orders, thereby removing alternative ordering possibilities from the agenda. The antidote to this tendency is to focus on the ways in which social relations constitute material forces with particular meanings, to strip out or leach the ideational content from seemingly 'material' arguments. This was the point of the stripped down model of the state in chapter five, which argued that, among other things, even self-interest is not an essential attribute of the state. By showing that even something as seemingly inherent to the material base as state self-interest is in fact a contingent social construction, we make it possible to conceive of viable cultures of anarchy that do not depend on such a limiting motivation. As noted above, efforts to denaturalize social kinds in this way should not forget that material forces have intrinsic features as well; in the end, there are many things about states that are not constructed by the international system. It is in trying to de-fetishize social kinds that the question of 'how much is X constituted by material forces versus ideas?' comes alive. The answer may have important political or transformative implications, but again, it is not likely to bear on the question of whether we should be materialists or idealists in the larger, philosophical, sense, and thus on where we should start our investigations. That is more a matter of *a priori* commitments.

The ultimately metaphysical aspect of this debate lends credence to Keohane's suggestion that we do not have to choose between materialism and idealism; if we focus on how material forces and ideas are articulated in concrete situations then we can have the best of both worlds. Reality will be the judge. Perhaps, but I am sceptical that we can do away with ontology so easily, for two reasons. First, international politics can only be observed with the aid of a very substantial conceptual and theoretical apparatus that tells us what kinds of objects there are in this world and how they are related. Strictly speaking it may be possible to treat this apparatus purely instrumentally, as a methodological convenience only, with no ontological implications. But as John Ruggie importantly observed back in 1983, in practice methods and starting points easily become tacit ontologies.[5] Being clear about how, for example, rational choice theory embodies an (at least) 'as if' individualist ontology that may obscure certain kinds of relationships seems like a relevant consideration in making such an analytical choice. And second, there is the question

[4] See Timothy Dant, 'Fetishism and the Social Value of Objects', *The Sociological Review*, 44 (1996), pp. 495–516.

[5] John Ruggie, 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity', *World Politics*, 35 (1983), p. 285.

of theoretical coherence and progress. As a scientific realist, when I think about what the hard core of 'political realism' consists in—which we would want to know if we wanted to assess whether it is a progressive or degenerating research programme, for example—I think that having a materialist ontology is essential. Would a pessimistic ideational theory of international politics, one that predicted lots of war and conflict, be a 'realist' theory? Not in my view, at least not in an explanatory as opposed to descriptive sense, because its ontology would be so different from other forms of 'realism'. Allowing a theory to switch its ontology and main causal mechanisms as long as some prescribed outcome is predicted does not seem like a fruitful way to maintain theoretical coherence. Attending to the necessity of making ontological choices is the best insurance we have against this kind of slippage. These choices do not have to become a straight-jacket, since in the end Keohane is right that the question *is* how material forces and ideas are articulated, not material*ism* versus ideal*ism*. But something has to go in the foreground and something in the background before we can even get started in our empirical investigations, and that choice should be informed by an ontological awareness.

In the book I argue that, compared to ontology-talk, the value of epistemology-talk for a discipline like IR is considerably less than something as imposing as the third 'Great Debate' might suggest. What matters more is what there is, not how we can know it, since we clearly *do* know things, and the 'how' of this knowledge will necessarily vary with the many different kinds of questions we ask in our field, and the varied tools at our disposal for answering them. Within certain very broad limits, we should have an epistemological Westphalia, adopting a rule of mutual recognition toward each other's preferred questions and methods, so that we can call off the positivism wars and get on with research about international relations. Unfortunately, in order to justify such a peace it is necessary to continue the wars by making epistemological arguments. The following three issues are addressed in that spirit.

Reasons as causes

This issue raised by Smith may seem arcane even by Third Debate standards, but my view that reasons can be causes, which I share with rational choice theory, is nevertheless likely to be an important object of criticism not only from postmodernists but also more 'mainstream', Wittgenstein-oriented constructivists working in the spirit of Friedrich Kratochwil and Nicholas Onuf, who treat reasons as constitutive rather than causal. I have nothing really new beyond the book to add here, but given Smith's intervention and the potential for unnecessary quarrelling it is worth briefly restating my argument.

It is a mistake to think that reasons must be *either* causal *or* constitutive. The belief that we must choose one or the other stems from conflating acting 'for' a reason (cause) with acting 'with' a reason (constitutive). Human beings do both. As such, trying to say that only one or the other is an appropriate way of talking about reasons will serve no purpose except to limit our inquiries and reduce our knowledge. The kinds of knowledge that ensue from studying these two senses of reason-giving are different, revealing things about the motivations of actors on the

one hand and about the cultural context that gives those motivations meaning on the other.[6] Our field needs both kinds of knowledge. Given the dominance of rationalism in IR it may be useful for constructivists to emphasize the ways in which reasons are not causes. But just as the development of a constitutive approach to reasons has suffered at the hands of causal imperialists, so it seems that Smith now wants to return the favour. Are proponents of the constitutive approach claiming that the knowledge produced by rational choice theory is illegitimate because it is causal—that reasons are in fact '*not*' causes—and should therefore presumably be purged from IR? Is that an implication of post-positivism? If so, that seems very problematic—collectively our study of international relations is in its infancy, so that throwing out a big part of what little we do know, however limited it might be, hardly seems a smart move. Indeed, doubly so, because there is no need for the discipline to make such a move (even if individual researchers might need to choose in order to get any work done). The proper criticism, if it be that, of the causal approach is not that reasons are not causes, but that they are not *only* causes, and that research focusing on their constitutive aspects is therefore important in its own right. Recognizing this would at least allow IR scholars, if inevitably not philosophers, to put this issue aside in favour of more pressing concerns of international relations.[7]

Explanation over understanding

Smith is concerned that the book makes constitutive theory an 'adjunct' to causal theory, in effect privileging Explanation over Understanding. This was not my intention. Quite the contrary—my hope was to provide an epistemological basis for seeing constitutive theory as a distinct and valuable aspect of scientific activity. It is true that in my view this kind of work should be part of a broader scientific agenda and as such contribute to causal theorizing, but what's wrong with that? Would it be better if constitutive and causal theorizing had nothing to do with each other, or that constitutive theory strive hard not to be 'scientific'? That doesn't seem to make sense. Constitutive and causal theories are not rivals but complements, equally necessary but functionally differentiated parts of a complete science. Because their questions are different they may require different methods in empirical research, but this need not involve anything so grand as different epistemologies. In the end we should expect of constitutive theories no less than causal ones that they be logically coherent, rely on publicly available evidence, be in some broad sense falsifiable, and be true or false based on their correspondence to the world—although the particular ways in which these criteria are met must reflect the constraints of the question being asked. Perhaps post-positivists mean to reject these basic requirements of science, and as such it is here that I can be seen to privilege Explanation over

[6] What the book refers to as the 'narrow' and 'broad' content of mind, respectively.

[7] For those who would nevertheless persist down this path two recent contributions to the debate, both providing a boost to the constitutive, anti-Davidson, side are Joseph Owens, 'Psychological Explanation and Causal Deviancy', *Synthese*, 115 (1998), pp. 143–69, and Daniel Hutto, 'A Cause for Concern: Reasons, Causes and Explanations', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59 (1999), pp. 381–401.

Understanding. But to reject the idea that evidence should be publicly available, or that the world 'out there' bears on the truth or falsity of our claims, seems unwise and, in any case, few post-positivists have done so in their own empirical research. If Explanation and Understanding should both be disciplined by the same overarching epistemological criteria, and if they ask complementary questions, then there seems little point in saying that one is 'more important' than the other, any more than gasoline is more important to driving a car than an engine.

Indeed, the tables can be turned on Smith here by noting what may be a tacit bias of his own, one I think widely shared among post-positivists, when he says (p. 152) that he does not believe that a scientific approach (by which he means Explanation) is 'appropriate' in social inquiry. Far from being an adjunct to causal theory, constitutive theory should apparently *replace* causal theory. Consider the methodological implications of such a view: the bulk of the tools used in mainstream IR—including most quantitative and formal methods—would have to be abandoned, and with them presumably the questions that seemed to call for those methods as well. This methodological monism amounts to a defensive mirror-image of the methodological monism to which post-positivists have themselves long been subjected by causal chauvinists. And equally unfounded. Social science should be question-driven, not method-driven. If we want to know whether there is such a thing as the democratic peace, or why—perfectly good questions—then large-*n*, quantitative methods seem like useful tools—not the only ones perhaps, but important ones nonetheless. If the post-positivist corrective to the excesses of positivism means we have to reject these tools on purely epistemological grounds as 'inappropriate', then I wonder whether the cure is worse than the disease. Rather than framing the issue in zero-sum terms as whether Explanation and Understanding is more important or appropriate, we should treat them pragmatically as asking different kinds of questions,[8] and recognize that their answers may have different methodological requirements as well. Methodological pluralism is the only sensible basis for a positivist/post-positivist peace.

Of cats and states

Having been a classmate of hers in graduate school I am not surprised that Roxanne Doty believes her cats exist, and I am sure that upon meeting them most other post-positivists in IR would agree with her. To my knowledge not even the most hardened postmodernists have explicitly denied that the objects of everyday experience exist.[9] Given this agreement on at least a 'commonsense realism',[10] however, it is then instructive to consider *how* Doty knows her cats exist. I can only speculate, but my guess is that she knows it because she has seen them with her own eyes, and because believing that her cats are real has enabled her to deal more successfully with them.

[8] I have explored the differences and relationship between causal and constitutive questions more fully in 'On Constitution and Causation in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 24:5 Special Issue, (1998), pp. 101–17.

[9] Though see Derek Edwards, Malcolm Ashmore, and Jonathan Potter, 'Death and Furniture: The Rhetoric, Politics, and Theology of Bottom Line Arguments Against Relativism', *History of the Human Sciences*, 8 (1995), pp. 25–49.

[10] See *Social Theory*, p. 52.

If so, note that this reasoning reproduces, in a lay science context, exactly what a positivist would say about professional science: she has used empirical observations and instrumental success to test the correspondence, the *truth*, of her theory of cats against the world. To be sure, things get more complicated when moving to things of greater interest to IR scholars like states, which are neither directly observable (thwarting commonsense realism) nor completely separable from observing subjects (unlike cats, states depend on actors' beliefs for their existence). Having conceded commonsense realism, however, it becomes harder to deny scientific realism. It can be done—that is the empiricist version of positivism—but in the book I develop a lengthy argument against empiricism, which Doty does not challenge. That leaves the unique features of social kinds as the last line of defence for a radical denial of positivism in IR. Perhaps there positivism finally collapses, though I argue to the contrary, but Doty has not supplied an argument to that effect either.

Raising the question of the ontological status of cats is useful because it calls attention to the fact that postmodern epistemology is not nearly as radical in practice as it sounds in theory. I don't want to tar postmodernists with the brush of ridiculous views: I want to know why they hold such conventional ones. Thus, in her own empirical work on representations of subordinate peoples in imperial discourses, Doty proceeds more or less as any positivist would—amassing data and developing the best narrative she can to make sense of them.[11] The same could be said about the empirical work of other IR scholars who are identified with postmodernism, like David Campbell or Cynthia Weber. Yet, if in practice postmodernists do not deny the existence, and even knowability, of a world outside of discourse, then what exactly are they saying? That all observation is theory-laden? That theories cannot be tested directly against the world but only against other theories? That as a result knowledge can never have perfectly secure foundations? These are all positions held by sophisticated positivists today. The straw man here in fact tends to be naive versions of positivism, which even if still believed by some are hardly a challenging target for post-positivist ire. Be that as it may, Doty has made an important move in explicitly embracing what has previously been only an implicit commonsense realism; now going a step further and addressing why she and other postmodernists are just like the rest of us in this respect might show that there is less at stake in the positivism wars than is often thought.

Issues of international politics

Keohane suggests that '[t]here are no propositions about state behaviour in *Social Theory of International Politics*, not even the 'few and big' propositions that Kenneth Waltz develops in his *Theory of International Politics*'. This is amply belied by Krasner's review, which found much to fault in my treatment of international politics. Among other things, *Social Theory* argues that the states system has for many years been a mostly Lockean culture, and that this culture generates particular behavioural tendencies at the macro-system level: balancing, security competition, and limited wars—the same tendencies predicted by Waltz. It argues, further, that at

[11] Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

least in its core this system is being transformed today into a Kantian culture—with its very different macro-level behavioural tendencies of collective security and non-violent dispute resolution—by the emergence of a growing number of states that are predisposed toward external self-restraint and interdependence. The difference from Waltz lies not in the absence of propositions about state behaviour but in the fact that its propositions are *conditional* rather than universal. *If* a critical mass of states position each other as rivals, then the system will acquire a Lockean structure with certain hypothesized dynamics; *if* a critical mass of states begin to treat each other as friends then this culture will be transformed into a Kantian one; and so on. To be sure, *Social Theory* does not adduce much empirical evidence to support the claim that these 'what ifs?' are in fact the case (Krasner). But by offering a theory of deep structure that can incorporate both Waltz's picture of the system and stylized facts about how that picture might be changing today, the book at least aspires to say something about international politics. With that goal as an eventual test, let me address four substantive issues raised by the reviews.

Reification of the state

Doty and Smith are concerned that I reify the state, treating it as a given, unitary actor, and neglecting domestic politics. By failing to problematize state agency 'all the way down', I seem to have done exactly what I criticize neorealists and neo-liberals for doing, namely making into a seemingly natural object what is in fact a contested social construction (a world populated by 'state agents'), thereby participating in its legitimation and reproduction.

Social Theory does reify the state, up to a point, and does so intentionally. If this in some small way helps to reproduce a state-centric world, then in my view that is a good thing.[12] For all their faults, states are the only democratically-accountable institutions we have today to provide security and political order. Perhaps other, better institutions can one day be developed, but until then we would do well not to tear states down too quickly. But the immediate reason for reifying the state is more prosaic: as a practical matter there is no way around it given the question addressed by the book, and so criticism on this score is largely misplaced. The book addresses the question, 'how should we understand the social construction of the states *system*?', not, 'how should we understand the social construction of the *state*?' The one asks how the relationships among the system's parts generate certain tendencies at the level of the whole, the other asks how the parts come into being in the first place. The complaint that *Social Theory* reifies the state implies that these questions are the same, that part of what is going on in the states system is the ongoing production of states 'all the way down', such that states are wholly endogenous to the system. This is a mistake.

In chapter five I argued that state agents are to an extent self-organizing phenomena and therefore to that extent constitutionally exogenous to the states system. The system is built up out of pre-existing parts; the latter are not constructions of the system all the way down. This is the kernel of truth in individualist theories like

[12] See Hedley Bull, 'The State's Positive Role in World Affairs', *Daedalus*, 108 (1979), pp. 111–23.

neorealism. To be sure, these parts are themselves *processes*, of which 'unitary state agency' is an ongoing effect. In the chapter (pp. 218–21) I tried to indicate what the requirements for such an effect are, but a full study of this effect would not be appropriate to the book. Like the internal processes that constitute the body in relation to society, which do not depend constitutionally on the latter for their existence or causal powers, the internal processes that constitute state agents are relatively autonomous from the states system, creating (usually) stable platforms for processes of social construction at the international level. Of course, one of the main arguments of the book is that the character of state agents is much less exogenous to the system than is often thought. My stripped down model of the 'essential state' is offered in that spirit, treating many of the state's seemingly natural or inherent qualities as actually contingent social constructions of the system. My state is much less 'given' than Waltz's, which goes some way toward addressing Doty and Smith's concern. But my failure to go all the way stems less from a fear of being too radical (Doty) than from the empirical reality of self-organization, which means that states are not, in fact, completely endogenous to the system. Neither Doty nor Smith addresses this self-organization argument in the book.

None of this is to say that IR scholars should not ask how internal processes construct the state, anymore than a sociological analysis of the varied ways in which societies construct the body means that biologists should not do their part in understanding the body as well. The self-organization thesis is a placeholder needed for my system-level theory, not an injunction against studying the internal determinants of state identity. Indeed, I suggest in the book and elsewhere that the latter is a very important question for IR, and a constructivist approach seems just as appropriate to answering it as it is for analysing the states system. But identity formation is not the question asked by *Social Theory*. *Given* an interest in the states system, we are forced by the nature of the subject matter to bracket the internal processes that constitute the state, to temporarily reify it, in order to get on with the systemic analysis. So yes, I am saying that we can be constructivists in one respect while reifying in another (Smith); indeed, I am saying we *have* to be. No one, not even the most relentlessly problematizing postmodernist, can problematize everything at once. It all depends on the question one is asking. Against a book on the states system, therefore, calls to 'stop reifying the state!' should be seen really as calls to 'change the subject!' I'm all for that, but it complements the systemic question, rather than replaces it.

Systemic culture is too thin

Although not dwelling on it, Krasner makes the important argument that norms at the international system level are considerably thinner or weaker than norms are at the unit level within states. This subsystem dominance suggests that foreign policy is driven primarily by exogenously given domestic rather than systemic factors, which seems to leave little scope for an analysis that emphasizes social construction at the system level. As Krasner notes, on the second page of the book I agree that the international system is a hard case for constructivism. The distribution of self-organizing, exogenously given, unit-level factors, whether material or ideational, is

crucial in international politics—as liberals have long emphasized[13]—and this must qualify any claims about the social construction of state identities by the culture of the system. But at least two points on the other side suggest the problem may not be as serious as Krasner thinks.

First, it is useful to put his argument into historical perspective. International politics has not always been subsystem dominant. Mlada Bukovansky argues powerfully that in the *ancien régime* culture of dynastic Europe, norms at the inter/transnational level were in fact a much more powerful determinant of foreign policy than was domestic politics, because the bonds of solidarity were stronger between states than within them (though this hardly precluded war)—and this, interestingly, despite the absence of the thick economic interdependence advocated by liberals today to strengthen international norms. Indeed, with the intermarriage among ruling elites and their common alienation from their own subjects, what we understand today as 'external' or 'foreign' politics was back then more like 'internal' or 'domestic' politics, and vice-versa.[14] Subsystem dominance is thus a comparatively recent phenomenon, linked in large part to the increasing dependence of state legitimacy on domestic society brought on by popular sovereignty. Of course, this still leaves system-level constructivists with the problem of subsystem dominance *today*, but it also raises questions about just how deep the latter really is. After all, many norms of *ancien régime* culture revolved around the concept of sovereignty, which today is taken for granted as the fundamental constitutive principle of international politics. The spread of popular sovereignty has transformed the traditional absolutist concept by giving it much deeper domestic roots,[15] but this too has increasingly become a systemic norm. And notwithstanding the many deviations from the sovereignty ideal there are in practice, no state in the international system is today calling for its abolition or transcendence. So, yes, subsystem dominance is an issue for a constructivist analysis of the international system, but it will require a long discussion, both theoretical and empirical, to sort it out.

Second, in a rather different vein, even if we grant that the international system today does not have a Lockean culture, this does not speak to the question of how thick international culture is—since its culture may simply be 'realist'. Krasner seems to be assuming that the only norms that count toward cultural thickness at the system level are the 'good', violence-reducing norms of sovereignty; hence the conclusion that if states violate those norms then they must not be following any norms at all—and a constructivist approach is therefore not very useful. But this neglects a central theme of chapter six, which is that a Hobbesian international system—'realism' (or, strictly speaking, *realpolitik*) in its purest form—can also have a culture, but one made up of 'bad', violence-disposing, norms.[16] The tendency to see war and conflict as necessarily involving a breakdown of cultural order, and therefore as being amenable only to a materialist analysis, is deeply-ingrained in IR.

[13] In this light my theory looks too 'realist'.

[14] Mlada Bukovansky, 'The Altered State and the State of Nature: The French Revolution and International Politics', *Review of International Studies*, 25:2 (1999), pp. 197–216, and *Ideas and Power Politics: The American and French Revolutions in International Politics*, forthcoming, especially ch. 3.

[15] See William Antholis, 'Liberal Democratic Theory and the Transformation of Sovereignty', Ph.D. dissertation (1993), Yale University.

[16] A point I first appreciated after reading Richard Ashley, 'The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space: Toward a Critical Social Theory of International Politics,' *Alternatives*, 12 (1987), pp. 403–34, which talks about the sense in which realism and power politics instantiate a kind of 'community'.

I wanted to emphasize that conflict may also *instantiate* a cultural order, becoming in effect a 'way of life'. Like game theory, constructivism is relevant not only when people cooperate but equally when they don't; all you need is action constituted by socially shared ideas. It may still be the case that these ideas are highly sensitive to changes at the unit-level, but at least this conclusion should not be inferred merely from the absence of 'good' norms alone. Realism can be a powerful culture too.

Wrong norms

Krasner demonstrates convincingly here and elsewhere that the norms of sovereignty, upon which the Hobbesian/Lockean/Kantian progression is fundamentally based, are not nearly as sacrosanct in modern state practice as I and many others suppose. Hierarchical, dominant-subordinate relationships pervade international politics, even in the face of juridical equality. States may have 'life', but not 'liberty'. Krasner uses this empirical reality to suggest in effect that focusing our attention on sovereignty, especially as exclusively as I have done, is to focus on the wrong set of norms. In response I would both dissent and agree.

I would dissent in the sense that despite the many exceptions, I continue to be very impressed with the power of the institution of sovereignty. David Strang's work on the different survival rates of states that were recognized as sovereign by international society and those that were not, and Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg's on the role of juridical sovereignty in sustaining modern African states point to just some of the ways in which sovereignty plays a deep role in helping to pacify international politics.[17] Moreover, sovereignty is of course at the heart of international law, and it remains the sole basis for membership in the UN, and thus for who gets to play the game of international politics in the first place. And then there is Henkin's oft-cited generalization about states' quite good record overall of compliance with international law, which it would take me a lot of persuading to reject—though I look forward to Krasner's new book making the case.[18] Perhaps this is all merely a case of seeing the glass half empty versus half full, but in my view a more realistic assessment of the actual practice of sovereignty need not substantially weaken the argument for putting the principle front and centre in a theory of international politics.

That said, I agree strongly with Krasner that sovereignty is not the only important constitutive principle in the international system, and in particular that its 'anarchic' norms often come into conflict with, and lose, to various kinds of more hierarchical structures: hegemonies, spheres of influence, patron-client relations, informal empires, and so on. I have done a little work on these structures in the

[17] David Strang, 'Anomaly and Commonplace in European Political Expansion: Realist and Institutional Accounts', *International Organization*, 45 (1991), pp. 143–62; Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg, 'Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood', *World Politics*, 35 (1982), pp. 1–24.

[18] Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

past,[19] but at the beginning of chapter six I specifically set the problem of theorizing them to one side in order to concentrate on sovereignty. There were good pragmatic and intellectual reasons for doing so, but clearly, a book on international politics, which in the real world is very hierarchical, that does not address hierarchy is missing a crucial dimension. Thus, if I share Keohane's hope that the book will have few imitators, I do hope very much that someone will write its companion, on the social theory of dominant-subordinate relationships between states.[20] These relationships pose more of a hard case for constructivist arguments than does sovereignty because they seem to come down to material capabilities (which may be relevant to Alker's interesting question about how well the book will 'travel'); hence the intuitive plausibility of Krasner's attempt to explain variations in hierarchical governance in terms of material costs and benefits. Others who have thought about this more than I make compelling arguments to the contrary, emphasizing the role of ideas, norms, and legitimacy.[21] But there is clearly much work to be done by constructivists on the social, as opposed to just material, foundations of global inequality, and how these structures articulate with the structure of juridical sovereignty.

Missed the boat

The last issue from the reviews that I have space to address is Krasner's suggestion that I have missed the boat on the most important change in the modern states system, the nuclear revolution, which due to its ideational focus the book spends hardly any time on. I agree with Krasner and Waltz that the nuclear revolution, and other aspects of the incredibly rapid development of military technology during the past half century, have been *very* important. It helped keep the Cold War cold, and may yet help start a hot war on the Asian sub-continent. From the standpoint of theory development, therefore, the question of technological determinism—a 'materialist' issue—seems like it would be a very fruitful line of inquiry that should get more attention than it has.[22]

Yet, in the end what matters is not technology but the fundamentally *political* issue of whether states are friends or enemies. Between enemies a nuclear revolution

[19] Michael Barnett and Alexander Wendt, 'The Systemic Sources of Dependent Militarization', in Brian Job (ed.), *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), pp. 97–119; Alexander Wendt and Michael Barnett, 'Dependent State Formation and Third World Militarization', *Review of International Studies*, 19 (1993), pp. 321–47; Alexander Wendt and Daniel Friedheim, 'Hierarchy under Anarchy: Informal Empire and the East German State', *International Organization*, 49 (1995), pp. 689–722. This work was based on part of my dissertation; I am less happy with it today than Krasner seems to be.

[20] An excellent place to start would be Nicholas Onuf and Frank Klink, 'Anarchy, Authority, Rule', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33 (1989), pp. 149–74.

[21] See, for example, Robert Jackson, 'The Weight of Ideas in Decolonization: Normative Change in International Relations', in Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane (eds.), *Ideas and Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 111–38; and Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[22] A good point of entry into this debate is Bruce Bimber, 'Three Faces of Technological Determinism', in Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx (eds.), *Does Technology Drive History?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 79–100.

will matter hugely; between friends, only incidentally. Material capabilities sometimes have marvellous causal powers, but these can only be actualized by the ideas that give them social meaning. The technological determinist might hope that a nuclear stalemate will eventually force people to accept certain ideas, like friendship (or even 'deterrence'), but the effort to prevent a stalemate in the first place might also lead to catastrophic war. Given such a possibility, putting our trust in material capabilities seems ill-advised, since it encourages policymakers to think they can find technological solutions to what are at base political problems.

Rather than the nuclear revolution, I would offer up as the most fundamental change in the international system this century the now almost complete triumph globally of the capitalist mode of production, with the considerably less complete spread of democracy a more distant second. Both transformations are at base cultural, involving the spread of new and very deep ways of thinking about ourselves, each other, and our relationship to nature. These sociocognitive transformations matter for international politics because they produce as an important by-product a disposition toward other states of self-restraint and engagement, which I argued in chapter seven can transform the boundaries of collective identity into a Kantian culture. Nuclear weapons may sometimes play a role in this transformation by helping to create perceptions of common fate, but if/when it is completed the ironical result will be to marginalize their significance, since among friends there is little use for weapons of mass destruction.

Conclusion

It seems that having covered so much ground so quickly it is relatively easy to stop quickly as well, rather than try to pull everything together. Discussion of the issues raised in this Forum will probably go on in any case for some time. So let me just reiterate the call for methodological pluralism made above by taking up Smith's concluding observation that the world depicted in *Social Theory* will be a 'familiar' one to rationalists. For Smith this is something of a lament, one echoed by Doty's wish that I had been more radical; others have told me as well that they see a diminution of transformative potential in the book compared to my earlier articles, a regressive move toward the rationalist mainstream.

That some people perceive a change I am glad, since I myself now see less opposition between rationalism and constructivism than I did starting out in 1987. Partly this may be due to a better appreciation for what Waltz and Keohane are saying, and partly to reading rationalist treatments of culture as 'common knowledge', which looks a lot like the constructivist's 'intersubjective understandings'. To be sure, rationalists and constructivists tend to do different things with this concept, and as such I hope rationalists aren't *too* comfortable with the book. As suggested by two 2×2 tables in chapter four (p. 144), the classical rationalist agenda addresses only 'one-eighth' of the difference that culture makes: causal effects on identity and interest, constitutive effects on identity, interest, and behaviour, and the collective, macro-level aspects of culture are all neglected. Even within the constraints of an individualist ontology I argued that this agenda can be expanded up to a 'half', but there is still much that, given those constraints,

rationalism is just not well equipped to address. Yet, if understood not as a complete theory of society but in more limited terms as a useful method for answering the questions for which it *is* suited—and these are important questions—then rationalist work can be readily assimilated to a constructivist agenda. After all, an eighth, let alone a half, is still a lot of culture. Thus, I am less convinced than some that rationalism versus constructivism should be the next Great Debate;[23] in one sense it would be like debating with oneself. (*Realism*, or materialism, versus constructivism is another matter . . .).

Whatever my own intellectual biography, however, there is a larger issue at stake here. This refers to what role our discipline's turn toward social theory—both rationalist and constructivist, in its modern and postmodern forms—over the past twenty years should play in the study of international relations. Overall this turn has been very productive, and made it easier for IR to participate in the wider social scientific endeavour. Yet, it also sometimes seems the case in IR that social theory is used in a negative way, as a weapon to *block* research into certain substantive questions as politically illegitimate, epistemologically inappropriate, or just plain unimportant. From this point of view 'familiarity' between rationalism and constructivism is anathema. Rationalist (or constructivist) work is the Other, and so must be cast out. It seems to me that this is exactly what the greater awareness of social theory in IR should not result in. The point of social theory should be to put existing first-order theories of international relations into a broader context, calling attention to perhaps tacit presuppositions that may create problems, and identifying questions that have not been asked. The goal should be to facilitate substantive investigations rather than discourage them, to unify our knowledge rather than Balkanize it. Since it seems clear that rationalist and constructivist analyses of international relations have both produced useful bits of knowledge, from this point of view their familiarity is a positively good thing. Approaches to social theory that cannot accommodate the insights of both, or at least encourage a fruitful conversation, seem counter-productive. For students of international politics, philosophy should be the servant, not the master.

[23] Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane, and Stephen Krasner, 'International Organization and the Study of World Politics', *International Organization*, 52 (1998), pp. 645–86.