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1 *Introduction*

In the sociology of science, paradigms are a bit like castles.[1] Scientists are knights in this metaphor, and assumptions are the liege-lords that the knights/scientists are sworn to defend. The strength of a paradigm can be measured by how many scientists are willing to defend its ramparts. Scientists tend to retain allegiance to their assumptions, so that the paradigmatic castles defend their inhabitants successfully, until those inhabitants die off. In this metaphor, it is in the nature of paradigms to be mutually exclusive – as a knight/scientist, one is more concerned about defending one's castle/paradigm, and in defeating others, than in building bridges among them. Paradigms, in other words, are distinct from, and in opposition to, each other.

This view of paradigms has been regularly co-opted in discussing both the sociology and the epistemology of international relations as a discipline. Thomas Kuhn's seminal discussion of paradigms and the sociology of science is regularly taught in graduate international relations theory courses, despite Kuhn's suggestions that his argument does not necessarily apply to social science.[2] Whether or not one accepts Kuhn's argument about the sociology of the natural sciences, and whether or not one sees paradigms in the social sciences as being equivalent to those in the natural sciences, it remains the case that the language of paradigms pervades thinking about international relations theory.[3] And with this thinking comes the castle mentality, in which paradigms are seen as mutually exclusive, as distinct ways of looking at international politics that should be kept separate, as things to be defended against other paradigms.

[1] The term 'paradigm' is used here following Kuhn 1970.
[2] For example Kuhn 1991.
[3] See, for example, Maliniak *et al.* 2007, which is in large part built around paradigms.

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The core argument of this book is that this paradigmatic way of thinking about different approaches to the study of international relations is problematic. It obscures both the compatibilities among different approaches, and the complex ways in which they interrelate. In building paradigmatic castles, it encourages insular thinking, and a focus on emphasizing differences. It also encourages paradigmatic partisans to try to fit too much within the walls of their particular approach, in an attempt to make their paradigmatic castle self-sufficient. In this way, it encourages what might be called a paradigmatic imperialism at the expense of communication within the discipline. Two particular approaches to the study of international relations that are often identified as paradigms are constructivism and realism, and the focus of this book is on the various relationships (ontological, epistemological, and political) between the two.

Constructivism and realism appear to have taken their places in the literature on international relations theory in direct opposition to each other. Examples of this opposition can be found in a number of places. Self-proclaimed constructivists often have (or at least are seen to have) worldviews that fall within liberalism, broadly defined, and often accept that categorization.[4] Moreover, some constructivist theorizing argues explicitly that constructivism and realism are logically incompatible[5] or, at least, antagonistic.[6] International relations pedagogy is also increasingly defining realism and constructivism as being categorically distinct, as witnessed by the increasing tendency in IR textbooks, even at the introductory level, to define realism and constructivism as two of three or more distinct paradigms in the field.[7] And constructivist theory came into the IR mainstream as a critique of structural or neorealism.[8] While much of this critique was specific to neorealism, and as such does not apply to classical realism, it set the tone for the incommensurability of constructivism with realism more generally.

To claim that constructivism is an IR paradigm equivalent to realism or liberalism is misleading, and the tendency to do so in textbooks is rarely mirrored in the scholarly literature. In the latter, constructivism

[4] Barkin 2003a.
[5] For example, Wendt 1999; Patomäki and Wight 2000.
[6] Lebow 2001.
[7] For example, Hughes 2000; Kegley and Wittkopf 2001; Lieber 2001. See also Maliniak *et al.* 2007.
[8] Wendt 1987; Dessler 1989; Onuf and Klink 1989.

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is usually identified as an ontology, epistemology, or methodology. But even here, the castle mindset is in evidence. Constructivism is usually defined as being distinct from either materialism or rationalism, with a wall separating social construction on the one hand from a materialist or rationalist mindset on the other. A prominent state-of-the-field exercise, in fact, identified the rationalism–constructivism controversy as the central debate in contemporary IR theory.[9] Constructivists who claim their methodology is incompatible with realism focus on the association between realism and both materialism and rationalism. Realists who claim their paradigm is incompatible with constructivism focus for the most part not on the methodology *per se* but on a perceived tendency for constructivists to be idealists or utopians.

Neither argument, however, holds up to careful scrutiny. Claims by constructivists that realist theory is incompatible with intersubjective epistemologies and methodologies are based on either caricatures or very narrow understandings of realism. And realist critics of constructivism are similarly guilty of inferring from the worldviews of some (perhaps many) practicing constructivists that the methodology is inherently biased toward liberalism. An examination of constructivist epistemology and classical realist theory suggests that they are, in fact, compatible. Not, of course, that good constructivism is necessarily realist, or that good realism is necessarily constructivist. But rather that constructivist research is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other (and more compatible with realism than with some), and that the realist worldview in turn can benefit from constructivist research methods.

A realist/constructivist synthesis would in particular serve a number of useful functions as part of the geography of international relations theory. One is to clear up a number of debates in the field in which the protagonists speak past, rather than to, each other, particularly with respect to the definition of, and relationships among, various approaches. Another is a language with which to speak to the relationship between the study of power politics and the study of ideals in international relations on the one hand, and the study of the social construction of international politics on the other. A third function is to clarify the relationships between mainstream approaches to

[9] Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1998; Ruggie 1998. See also Keohane 1988 and Fearon and Wendt 2002.

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international relations and critical and postmodern approaches that view both constructivism and realism with skepticism, albeit for different reasons. A final function, perhaps the most useful for both realist and constructivist scholars of international politics, is to clarify both the core concepts and limitations of these two approaches themselves.

From paradigms to realist/constructivist synthesis

To get to a discussion of the specific relationships between constructivism and realism requires four steps. The first is a critique of what might be called paradigmatism, an understanding of the discipline of international relations as a set of discrete paradigms that need not interact, that need not inform each other. What we tend to think of as paradigms cannot successfully serve the function of complete sets of assumptions that suffice as starting points for research into international politics, for two reasons. The first is that each of these so-called paradigms is really an assumption about one particular aspect of the study of international relations. In the case of constructivism, this aspect is sociological, the assumption that we can usefully understand political institutions as social constructs. In the case of realism, this aspect is political, the assumption that power will remain a salient feature of politics, whatever the institutional structure. The former tells us about how to study politics, but little about how politics work. The latter tells us about how politics work, but not how to study them.[10]

To think in terms of paradigms, then, is to jumble together assumptions about epistemology, methodology, politics, and a variety of other things. Realist political theory tells us little about methodology. To think in terms of a realist paradigm, then, is to underspecify method in the study of international politics. Analogically, constructivist epistemology tells us little about politics *per se*, and thus to think in terms of a constructivist paradigm is to underspecify political theory. Any study of actual political practice requires both method and a theory of politics. Focusing on particular paradigms, therefore, does not give us a sufficiently broad set of assumptions, of background conditions, for actual research into international relations.

What can happen as a result is that paradigms expand to fill in the missing assumptions. But since the expansion is beyond the scope of

[10] Jervis 1998 makes this point.

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the original focus of the paradigm, the new assumptions are often not grounded in the same logic as the original core assumptions of the paradigm. This expansion can have various effects, some benign, some pernicious. In the case of constructivism, the process of expansion often leads in the context of specific research projects either to the unreflexive adoption of political theory in a way that is incompatible with the basic tenets of the approach, or to a focus on social theorizing for its own sake that distracts from rather than illuminates the study of international politics.

In the case of realism, the effects of paradigmatic expansion are even more problematic. The attempt over the past four decades to make realism more "scientific" by trying to make it into a predictive tool in the manner of the behavioralist approach to social science has not only served to distract from the core realist insights about power and politics, but has actively undermined realism's ability to pursue those insights. This distraction is particularly true of neorealism, and in fact I make the argument that neorealism, in attempting to make a systemic theory out of realism, has lost sight of the key insights of the approach.[11] Whatever one thinks of neorealism in its own terms, it is in this sense a failure as an attempt to systematize realism. The realism that is presented in this book as compatible with constructivism is the classical version, and the various discussions of realism here should be read in that light.

These observations lead to the second step in getting to the discussion of constructivism and realism, which is the claim that the discipline is better served by thinking of the various approaches to the study of international relations in terms of core concepts rather than in terms of paradigms. The core concepts underlying constructivism and realism, I will argue, are intersubjectivity and power politics respectively. The key differences between core concepts and paradigms are twofold. The first lies in the process of definition. Paradigms are an all-encompassing way of looking at the world in the context of a particular discipline or object of study.[12] As such, thinking of

[11] Archetypical works of classical realism, as I use the term, include: Morgenthau 1948; Carr 1964; Wolfers 1962. Archetypical works of neorealism include: Waltz 1979; Gilpin 1981; Mearsheimer 2001. For discussions of the process of getting from one to the other, see *inter alia* Jervis 1994 and Guzzini 1998.

[12] For example, Kuhn 1970, p. 175.

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approaches as paradigms can lead to maximalist definitions, in which the paradigm is seen to speak to all aspects of study. Core concepts, conversely, lend themselves to minimalist definitions, and the acceptance that many aspects of a particular study will be orthogonal to the concept. Only by stripping down definitions of the approaches to these core concepts can we recover something that is about the study of international politics, rather than the disciplinary politics of international relations.

The second key difference between core concepts and paradigms is the way in which they interact. Paradigms stand in opposition to each other: to believe in one is to reject others. This leaves little ground for thinking of ways in which they relate to each other. Concepts interact in more complicated ways. Sometimes they are orthogonal to each other. Sometimes they do in fact have a relationship of opposition, but even then the relationship will not necessarily follow the exclusionary pattern of paradigmatic thinking. For example, realism clearly defines itself in opposition to idealism. But this opposition is dialectic rather than exclusionary – the seminal realists of the middle of the twentieth century recognized that realist logic was meaningless in the absence of political idealism, even as they argued against a politics based on that idealism.

Which in turn leads to the third step in getting to a discussion of constructivism and realism: the observation that the core concepts underlying the various approaches to the study of international relations interact in various and complex ways. There is of course a trade-off in looking at these interactions. Without some attempt to categorize or to order them, understanding the interaction among approaches becomes difficult, as there is no conceptual framework for communication among practitioners of the various approaches. Conversely, too simplified or rigid a categorization can stifle communication by failing to recognize the various links among approaches. The paradigmatic view is in a way the ultimate in simplistic categorizations, in that it labels a given piece of research as either in or out of the paradigm. Somewhere between a rigidly paradigmatic approach and an unordered conceptual free-for-all is a level of categorization that is amenable to productive communication among approaches.

One way to look at this middle ground is to see disciplinary approaches in a grid, or a matrix. In this view, the core propositions of an approach speak to some dimensions of the study of international

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relations, but not to others. These dimensions can be methodological, epistemological, political, or a variety of other things. Realism, in this view, would take a clear position in the dimension of the place of power politics in the study of international relations, but would not speak clearly to various specifically methodological questions. Constructivism would take a much clearer position on questions of the ontological relationship between individual and society than on questions of the role of power in society. Pairs of approaches could then be related in the matrix as compatible on some dimensions, incompatible on others, and, quite often, orthogonal on many. This matrix need not be formalized, and is perhaps best not formalized. A matrix with an indeterminate number of dimensions will be more flexible in encouraging communications between various approaches, defined in various ways, but at the same time gives a framework for seeing approaches in the broader context of the discipline, and of conceptual relationships within the discipline.

Using this matrix metaphor as a lens provides the fourth step in getting to a discussion of constructivism and realism. This lens gives us a way to look at the relationship between the two approaches, that allows us to see points of tangent, points of opposition, and dimensions in which the two approaches are orthogonal. A realist/constructivist synthesis can then be built around the points of tangent, in which the two approaches reinforce each other where they are orthogonal, that is nonetheless cognizant of the real points of tension between them. Most of this book is devoted to the application of this lens to this particular relationship. It looks at a variety of dimensions on which the two approaches are compatible or in tension, as well as dimensions on which one is clearly located but the other is not. It also looks at dimensions on which the conventional wisdom sees the two in tension, but upon closer examination this tension turns out to be false. This is particularly true of the purported tension between materialism and ideas, and that between social construction and rationality.

The resulting synthesis is one that brings from classical realism a focus on power politics and on foreign policy, and from constructivism a focus on, and a methodology for studying, the co-constitution of structures and agents. It builds on a common foundation of a logic of the social, and a demand for reflexivity and historical context found in both constructivism and classical realism. It is very much not the stuff

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of a new paradigm – being a hybrid, it suffers the limitations of both constructivism and realism, and as such is only applicable to a subset of questions in international relations, those that look at the social construction of public policy, particularly foreign policy, in international politics. But within the context of that subset of questions, it can usefully inform the work of both constructivists and realists.

This sense of limitation distinguishes the argument being made here from those made in earlier discussions of a realist/constructivist synthesis, such as Michael Williams' *The Realist Tradition and the Limits of International Relations* and Roger Spegele's *Political Realism in International Theory*.[13] The synthesis in these works is often for the purpose of what might be called a rehabilitation of classical realism. Constructivism plays the role of providing epistemological and ontological heft to classical realist insights about morality and prudence in international politics. As such, constructivism is used in these works to the end of reinforcing a realist paradigm that avoids the internal contradictions of neorealism, and of the positivist turn of contemporary realism more generally. These works are, in other words, exercises in paradigm building. While clearly sympathetic to a rehabilitation of classical realism, I argue against paradigm building. This book proposes the non-paradigmatic interaction of approaches to the study of international relations, rather than an argument for a new paradigm, inasmuch as it addresses the limitations as much as the possibilities of a synthesis of constructivism and realism, and contextualizes the synthesis in the broader geography of the field.

Plan of the book

While these four steps describe the overall logic of this book, they do not describe the order of presentation of the argument. Rather, the book proceeds by looking sequentially at various dimensions of international relations theory that are relevant to the creation of a synthesis of realist constructivism. It attempts to build the relevant part of the matrix, and to draw from it observations both on constructivism and realism individually, their internal logics and their relationships with other approaches to the study of international relations, and on the relationship between the two.

[13] Williams 2005; Spegele 1996.

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A first step in this process is the definition of terms, particularly definitions of constructivism and realism. As noted above, the operational definition of constructivism that I propose centers on intersubjectivity, whereas that of realism centers on power politics. Both definitions are somewhat contentious, the latter probably more so than the former. Chapter 2 is therefore devoted to unpacking, explaining, and justifying these definitions. In the case of realism, it argues that the various definitional elements that have often been proposed for realism all stem from the assumption that power politics matters. Focusing on power politics obviates the need for these additional elements. It also focuses attention on the core realist proposition that not only is power politics present in international relations, but it is central to them. In the case of constructivism, it argues that defining the approach in negative terms, of things that it is opposed to, is less useful than defining it in positive terms that give the scholar guidance on what to do, rather than on what not to do. Furthermore, the oppositional concepts most often used, materialism and rationalism, are problematic. The following two chapters discuss why.

Materialism is the focus of Chapter 3. This chapter does four things. First, it looks at the ideas/materialism dichotomy, and finds that it is not quite as dichotomous as many make it out to be. There are few scholars out there who deny that there are ideas embedded in our material reality, and to make the argument that realists are at heart brute materialists is to create a rhetorical straw man. Second, it looks at the ideas/materialism distinction in the context of international relations theory more broadly, and finds that the distance between constructivism and realism on this issue may in fact be less than the distance between constructivism and many variants of both Marxism and liberalism. And finally, it makes the case that the real distinction that proponents of an ideas/materialism dichotomy are getting at is really about history rather than materiality. This dichotomy is really between approaches that look primarily to historical context and those that understand social institutions as transhistorical in nature.

Chapter 4 examines the distinction between rationalist and sociological approaches to international relations theory. This distinction is a tricky one. There is certainly a fundamental ontological difference between the methodologically individualist approach to social science underlying rationalism, and the methodological holism underlying sociological approaches. But this does not mean that the former

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can look only at strategic behavior, and the latter only at appropriate behavior. Furthermore, this difference is largely irrelevant to a discussion of the relationship between constructivism and realism, because neither of these approaches is methodologically individualist. Classical realism speaks of rationality, but uses the term in a different way than does, say, rational choice theory. Realism is in fact more on the holistic end of the spectrum, to the extent that its key unit of analysis, the state, is a social aggregate. Its logic is therefore based on the assumption that people will act in the interests of the social aggregate, even when this requires action that is not in their immediate individual self-interest. As such, realism shares with constructivism a foundation in a logic of the social rather than a logic of the individual.

This logic of the social has a number of ramifications, which are the subject of the subsequent two chapters. Chapter 5 looks at the relationship between a logic of the social and the idea of a public, or national, interest. This is a point at which constructivism and realism tangent in interesting ways – both approaches assume the existence of a public interest, but do so in different ways. And in doing so, both distinguish themselves from critical and postmodern approaches that have quite different logics of the social. Chapter 6, meanwhile, discusses the constraints that the aspects of the logic of the social that the two approaches share in common place on both constructivist and realist analysis. The key constraint in this context is reflexivity. Since the logic of the social underlying both approaches assumes that political morality is contextual, scholars in both traditions need to recognize that political activity will be seen elsewhere through a different normative lens than by those who undertake it. Recognizing that this is the case therefore requires of scholars that they examine critically the extent to which their own political morality is embedded in their analysis. Many contemporary realists, particularly neorealists, and probably some constructivists as well, might find this claim to be contentious at best. But it nonetheless inheres in the logics of both classical realism and of constructivism.

The discussion of the logic of the social in these two chapters is primarily about structure, about the ways in which existing social structures both constrain and enable political behavior. But both constructivism and realism look to agency as a, perhaps the, key mechanism for change in these structures, and hence in international politics more generally. Chapter 7 deals with agency in this context,

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