

SAVING REALIST PRUDENCE

Stefano Guzzini

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INTRODUCTION

Impatience with the straitjacket that paradigmatic thinking seems to impose on intellectual endeavour and academic debate is by now legendary in International Relations (IR). It is admittedly also a very IR phenomenon. Most of our colleagues in neighbouring disciplines, such as political science for instance, are puzzled why our introductory courses are filled with -isms and why we spend so much time exposing the difference that analytical lenses make to our way of seeing and analysing the world: 'Get it over with and do the real thing.'

But for IR, this is part of the real thing. The discipline of International Relations has a peculiar lineage. Most of the social sciences developed in reaction to and observation of the functional differentiation Western societies went through, in particular in the 19th century: the autonomisation of the economy from the state, of civil society from the state, indeed of the political system / government from the state. These disciplines responded to the need to understand the newly developing and autonomous logics of the market, the society and government.

Not so for IR. Not being a new domain, it did not have to reflect on a newly established autonomy. On the contrary, the management of external affairs was a well-established field of practice and knowledge, perhaps the only one in which the state almost survived in a still undifferentiated manner. Hence, the discipline originates not in the need to establish new knowledge, but the other way around – from the changed circumstances that led established knowledge to justify its tenets through a discipline (Guzzini 2013a).

As a result, in this discipline knowledge was first and foremost practical knowledge usually held by insiders, not external scientific observation. Moreover, such practical knowledge would import common sense and established debates from primarily European diplomatic practice into this primarily Western discipline. This has two crucial implications for understanding IR's paradigm-savviness. First, it explains the special place of the realism-idealism debate, a debate that informs the background knowledge in diplomatic practice as it has evolved over time. In other words, that debate was important 'at its inception' not because it exhausts all the ways of observing world affairs from some external standpoint, but because it represents the ideational lifeworld of the accomplished international practitioners themselves. Our disciplinary knowledge becomes a hermeneutic bridge to the common sense of international practice. Second, international practice experiences more than one (national) view of things. Pluralism and irreducibly different and historically evolved ways of understanding and acting in world politics are fundamental to the diplomatic culture as it has developed in the era of the sovereign state. Practical knowledge in IR is based upon the self-awareness of this pluralism. It is the condition for the possibility of modern diplomacy. That not everything can be reduced to one view from one place is no surprise here. Multiple paradigms or worldviews are 'normal'.

There have been recent attempts simply to get rid of what, to some, must appear as a stifling multiplicity of evil 'isms' (Lake 2011). Although Barkin's (2010) impatience with paradigmaticism may sound similar, it is of a completely different kind. For him, paradigms are not evil as such – indeed, much of the proposed realist constructivism is paradigmatically informed, so much so that Sjoberg (this volume) thinks it does not shed enough of its past and ends up being an overly narrow enterprise. Barkin's impatience is driven by the idea that even if the attempt to bundle assumptions and concepts up into schools is inevitable, it should be informed by curiosity to think outside the box and prudence in giving foreign policy advice. It is much closer to the spirit of Albert Hirschman's (1970: 335) earlier admonition not to fall for the clean and pure theoretical model and what he called, quoting Flaubert, 'la rage de vouloir conclure', that is, the desperate desire to make a final point that forces closure upon an open and plural social world.

Yet the combinatorial logic of paradigms can be fraught with difficulties. As other observers have already noted, it may not combine anything whatsoever but simply qualify an already existing paradigm (Jackson and Nexon 2004: 339). Adding norms and ideas to power hardly challenges realism, whether structural or classic. Indeed, all rationalist approaches include beliefs in the analysis of a rational choice, and hence the possibility to influence others by changing their beliefs (propaganda), or by manipulating perceptions to appear strong enough to pre-empt resistance, as in Morgenthau's politics of 'prestige' (Morgenthau 1948: 50ff.), or by avoiding 'reputational costs' that undermine one's legitimacy or power (Mercer 1996). No need for constructivism, then. Inversely, constructivism has no problem with power politics. Wendt reserves a whole culture of anarchy for it. His synthesis has always been one in which realism is 'preserved' (as in Hegel's *Aufheben*) by being integrated into his social approach and by showing that the best way to a better world order is a version of Realist prudence in what is his master variable of 'self-restraint' (Wendt 1999: 357ff.).¹

The reason for this difficult combination and the tendency to subsume one under the other can be found in the underlying ontological assumptions of the different approaches (Sterling-Folker 2004). *Pace* all attempts at eclecticism, they are often not compatible. When paradigms are bridged within an explicitly explanatory realm, the result often betrays a certain unwillingness to consider the missing meta-theoretical ground on which the encounter is supposed to take place. Realist constructivism would be hardly worth the candle if it simply added yet another round to the realist-idealist debate, with both sides updated (and reduced) to a more social version of classical realism and a power-driven constructivism.

In the following, I will try to show that there is another way to read 'realist constructivism'. Rather than seeing it as a combination of two explanatory theories, Barkin's book allows it to be a combination of different types of theorising. It combines a political theory informed by realism (based on power politics) that, in turn, informs a realist foreign policy strategy and morality based on a prudential

¹ Needless to say, all these approaches from Waltz to Wendt view world politics from the position of a great power that needs to practice self-restraint, a privilege many other actors can hardly envisage.

check on power, with an explanatory theory (what he repeatedly calls a 'method') largely informed by constructivism. In this way, his book can be seen as one attempt to think the different layers of IR theorising in parallel while also exploring new combinations not *within* but *across* types of theorising. It would join Hedley Bull in his earlier critique of paradigmaticism he found in Martin Wight's threefold classification, namely that it was 'too ambitious in attributing to the Machiavellians, the Grotians and the Kantians distinctive views not only about war, peace, diplomacy, intervention and other matters of International Relations but about human psychology, about irony and tragedy, about methodology and epistemology' (Bull 1976: 111).

SAVING REALIST FOREIGN POLICY FROM REALIST EXPLANATORY THEORY...

The peculiar pedigree of the discipline of IR explains the quite remarkable position realism occupied for a long time within it and which Barkin's realist constructivism tries to save, albeit in a revised form. Realism was the theory that helped to turn practical knowledge into scientific hypotheses (Guzzini 1998). For this purpose, it mobilised a series of assumptions about the nature of politics that were to provide the link from a practice of prudential power politics to a utilitarian theory of power politics (and not the other way around). In so doing, realist theorising came to stand for three things in parallel: a political theory or *ontology* of politics, an explanatory *theory* of power politics, and a foreign *policy* strategy of prudential power politics. Rationality was the glue in that the assumption of rational action provided a measuring rod for understanding *policies* and a guide to action in which the observer simply looks over the shoulder of the practitioner, as Morgenthau put it. Through an assumption of rationality that bridges the levels of the actor and the observer, both can see the same things and each can inform the other, in both directions.

Looking at much of IR, and also within the realist tradition, it is easy to see how these three levels are not always, indeed only rarely, distinguished. Yet just assuming that power politics means the same in an ontology, an explanatory theory and a foreign policy strategy is a stretch. Much confusion could be avoided if one unpacked the levels and investigated more closely their relationships and the different translations needed to provide a coherent whole. Classical realists assumed this to be necessary: no leg of this tripod was to be removed or forgotten. But their solution to the problem of keeping them together has not worked so far. When realists attempted to update their explanatory theory, they invariably undermined their political theory and/or practical maxims of foreign policies. Moreover, their insistence on their wider political theory was not answered by any specific explanatory theory that came under the name of realism or rigid methodologies that ran afoul of realism's ontological assumptions.

Barkin's realist constructivism can be understood as precisely such an attempt to preserve the different levels while providing a better fit between them so as to save a foreign policy strategy characterised by prudence. For this, he argues, he combines the political theory of realism with the social theory of constructivism. At first sight this may merely appear to be two different takes on explanatory theory. Some of the discussion of the book on how to make the respective assumptions compatible lends credit to such a reading. But then, there are other passages which sound quite different, as when he writes that '[r]ealist 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' (Barkin 2010: 4).

He is well aware that this package will not go down well with many realists, who will immediately see themselves reduced to mere philosophical handmaidens of a constructivist scholarship that takes the limelight of science in this deal – and not only because, in the wake of our teaching IR, some of them may no longer have much inkling about the underlying realist philosophy in the first place. For them, despite all nice citations from classical realists like Carr and Morgenthau, Barkin sells them out. Yet, Barkin would be right to say that his take is a most faithful solution to the realist conundrums in that it combines scientific theory and practical knowledge. Instead of time and again fine-tuning a realist explanatory theory, only to see it impoverishing realist political theory and practical maxims, why not turn the strategy around and keep the original realist insights, yet give them a different scientific basis, be it a constructivist one?

To this end, Barkin does embark on a re-definition of these different traditions so as to make them meet not within the same explanatory level, but across different levels of theorising. Having decided in favour of a constructivist explanatory approach, the meta-theoretical underpinnings of realism need to be re-phrased. That means first and foremost a move towards those classical realists who were never keen on US scientific theories themselves (although Morgenthau is a pretty duplicitous candidate here; see also Prieto, this volume, footnote 6), and mobilising the social and critical Carr (which made him seem hardly a realist at all to others), as well as realism's ideational components and contingent theory of action and history. Clearly, once the constructivist theory is taken as a reference point, realist explanatory theories have to go, the more determinist or structural, the worse.²

And what about constructivism? Does it need to be modified to fit into a realist political theory? Well, luckily, in Barkin's assessment, constructivism lacks a political theory. In his words: 'Constructivism as a social theory does not imply any particular theory of politics' (Barkin 2010: 164). Being an empty shell, there is

² I think this paints a too neat picture counterposing classical and neo-realists. It is almost as if the move to a systemic theory is the main reason for being so theoretically misled. And so neo-realism is reduced to being structural realism, never mind Robert Gilpin (1981)'s highly 'transhistorical' (Barkin 2010: 46), scientific, and yet purely individualist utilitarian theory of war and change. My sense is that Barkin particularly targets Waltz's structural realism because it clearly positions itself at the level of observation and leaves foreign policy out, less as a theory (since it is implied), but as a foreign policy strategy.

nothing in constructivism that would impede us in assuming a definition of politics that is centred around power, according to Barkin.

Using this combination, Barkin achieves something which he does not theorise explicitly, but which shines through as his ultimate goal: prudential realism as a foreign policy theory (i.e. strategy or doctrine) can be saved. 'Realism's primary purpose is ultimately policy prescription' (Barkin 2010: 167). And from here come the rich pages on what he calls a foreign policy theory, which is prescriptive and not predictive, that is, it is a toolbox for action, not for observing it. Yes, he includes reflexivity in the equation, not the reflexivity of the outside observer, but the reflexivity of the accomplished statesperson who thus avoids pitfalls. He mentions three such pitfalls:

The first is that foreign publics and elites are likely to see events in international politics, and our responses to these events, through the lens of their political morality. The second is that political moralities change. And the third is that our foreign policies can have a recursive effect on that change. Reflexivity helps the realist [SG: foreign policy maker] to deal with all three of these corollaries more effectively. (Barkin 2010: 92)

Indeed, his entire approach culminates in the different issues that are to be taken into account in achieving such a prudent foreign policy. His realist constructivism is his way of providing a better basis for such prudence (for choices need to be justified). He sees prudence as better derived from constructivism's social and reflexive approach to understanding a reality that is, however, fundamentally constituted by a realist power ontology. 'It suggests that realists should not be in the business of either denying a role for agency in international politics by arguing that structures, of whatever sort, are determinative, or of theorizing agency. For classical realism, a prudent foreign policy is one that recognizes, and allows for, the unpredictability of agency' (Barkin 2010: 116). Having some unilateral bullying as a target, he writes that

classical realism prescribed prudence, prescribed a foreign policy in which we do not become over-confident about our knowledge of the world, of how other actors will respond to our foreign policy, and of what we can successfully accomplish in the world. 'Realism, then, considers prudence – the weighing of the consequences of alternative political actions – to be the supreme virtue of international politics.' (Barkin 2010: 126, citing Morgenthau)

And in this weighing, political morality and the public interest play a major role that also explains why they feature so prominently in the book.

Some realists would come back and say that, after all is said and done, a prudential foreign policy is ultimately a utilitarian choice ('the weighing of consequences', as Morgenthau put it). Consequently, it is not quite clear why we need anything more than some rationalist theory of action which factors the historically evolved ideas and institutions of international society into the equation. If all that was needed was

to get rid of overly determinist and systemic theorising, then we can do that. This would correspond more to the European wing of neo-classical realism which starts from domestic politics and not from a given international anarchy, that is, from the 'classical', not the 'neo' (Mouritzen and Wivel 2005; Wivel 2005; Mouritzen 2017, 2009). This would hardly look like a US-style realist theory of action (but see Wohlforth 1993), yet it would be one. It would suffer the same fate as the English School's reception by US realists (Copeland 2003). But then, so be it. It could still be proposed as a realist theory of foreign policy and not just as a prescriptive foreign policy strategy. Hence, is Barkin's move enough to defend constructivism in its privileged place for providing method and rigour to the explanation?

... DOWNPLAYING INTERPRETIVISM...

This is where Germán Prieto's two moves come in (this volume). According to him, the existing Realist Constructivism would need to move more decisively towards interpretivism in its explanatory setup. With this also comes a shift in the understanding of 'explanation' itself by redefining the underlying understanding of causation. Second – a topic he mentions briefly in the conclusion – it would need to face the incompatible ontologies between constructivism and realism. This section touches briefly on his first point.

In a famous article, often cited, for its consequential content yet little received, Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie (1986) argued that regime theory was on the right track, but did not go far enough. It allowed for the intersubjective ontology of regimes, constituted by shared ideas and practices, but then it used a positivist epistemology. As a result, ideas become something external to the agent which, like a billiard ball, hit actors and move them (or not) to a certain behaviour, just like matter (for a similar critique, see the similarly often overlooked ending to Yee 1996). It epistemologically objectified and exogenised the intersubjective ontology. Instead, it would be more coherent to go the extra mile and turn to an interpretivist understanding, one in which ideas are shared and yet are not external to an agent in causing his or her behaviour; rather, they are internal and provide *reasons* for action. In doing so, they are part of a causal complex, as critical realists would call it, yet cannot be determinist. Taking the ontology of ideas seriously means leaving positivism behind.

Prieto continues from there to develop a common ground on which the concerns of the realists can be combined with others, yet in the terms laid down by scientific realists and, I would add, some constructivists. The trick is to say that ideas may well be causal, but only once we have reconceptualised causation. This re-theorisation happens to take place in a way that goes well beyond IR realist explanations, as well as more shallow attempts to combine realist and liberal ideas. Prieto shows them to be mechanisms that are both singular and emerging (for a good discussion of causal mechanisms that would be sensitive to history, see Mayntz 2004). And he rightly points to a ground on which scientific realists and

constructivists can meet, as shown in the positive reception by Friedrich Kratochwil (2008: 96-97) of Heikki Patomäki's (1996) critical realist analysis of causation.³

It is not impossible to re-describe some classical realists as interpretivists or constructivists *avant la lettre* (for a re-framing of the English School in this sense, see Dunne 1995). But Prieto sees Carr's and in particular Morgenthau's methodological reflections as too weak and unsystematic in today's terms to really be able to accomplish that. In other words, it is not their missing vocabulary that is responsible for this lack, something a consistent reconstruction could remedy (although some good efforts could be made with Carr, odd realist out as he is). In short, any realist constructivism that is consistent in its aims will have to go that extra mile towards an interpretivist methodology. This point is consistent with Barkin, yet not always clearly brought out, as Prieto insists.

... AND MISSING CONSTRUCTIVISM'S POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

In his conclusion, Prieto also points to the ontological differences between realist understandings of power politics and constructivism. Obviously, a combination in which constructivism would also have a word to say about political ontology would be a stronger argument in favour of this hybrid combination. Yet this combination is not as easy as Barkin lets it appear (Sterling-Folker 2004). He makes the rather strong statement that constructivism has no specific theory of politics. This overlooks a series of contributions, old and new. And if they are not compatible with realism, then Barkin's combinatorial solution may not work, or only by making realism adapt once more.

The starting point for constructivism (and here there is no difference from post-structuralism) is a relational and process ontology, which, incidentally, also grounds an open and processual (emergent) understanding of causal mechanisms. The major identities, be they race, gender, nation, etc. are repeatedly re-constituted. So are social institutions, their apparent continuity being not the result of stasis but of an ongoing transformation that reproduces them. Change in them does not point to a sudden dynamics, but simply to a different take on the existing dynamics. We are what we are becoming. And so are states and international institutions. Constantly. We write IR theory with innumerable gerund endings: identification, securitization, de-naturalization, and so on.⁴

If everything is in flux and processes are such important constitutive moments, they become central for the understanding of politics. What goes into these constituting

³ There has been a wider concern recently with re-conceptualising causation in IR that includes critical realists and others. See the special issue of the *Journal of International Relations and Development*, in particular the articles by Stefano Guzzini (2017b), Adam Humphreys (2017), Patrick Jackson (2017), Milja Kurki (2017), Heikki Patomäki (2017) and Hidemi Suganami (2017).

⁴ There is no way to cover the research here, but unsystematic pointers in IR include Jorge Luis Andrade Fernandes (2008), Claudia Aradau (2004), Roxanne Lynn Doty (1996), Maria Mälksoo (2012) and Jutta Weldes (1999).

processes? How do they draw the lines of racial, gender, class or other identities? How do these lines affect social hierarchies? There is a power politics of process (Guzzini 2017a).

Sjoberg's friendly suggestions to combine with more than just realism and constructivism and to take into account, for instance, critical theory and decolonial, queer and feminist approaches surely reflects some of her interests. But it is probably not fortuitous that they all posit as central the questions of these constitutive processes that inform both agency and structure, nor that all four politicise the lines drawn in those processes in a way the proposed combination of realism and constructivism does not, as it lacks a constructivist political ontology. Moreover, her complementary theories are however not easily combined, say, with the recourse to socio-biology which is increasingly *en vogue* in defending a realist understanding of politics as a struggle for power, although arguably such biological explanations use a probabilistic version of causality not used in the sciences themselves (Sokolowska and Guzzini 2014).

Consequently, the phrase 'power politics' is not so self-evident anymore when used within a constructivist political ontology, as Prieto also hints. I am all for foregrounding power analysis in constructivism (e.g. Bially Mattern 2001, 2005), not only in its political ontology, but also in the performative analysis where the ways we see and perceive the world or our speeches are not passive representations of but active interventions in that world (as legends of feminists, post-colonial thinkers and Foucaultians have done. For my own take, see the articles collected in Guzzini 2013b). The use of 'power' in our political discourse calls up ideas of agency and responsibility. Ultimately 'power' politicises issues, since whoever had power was able to intervene in changing the course of events according to our individualist political discourses. Furthermore, we have become aware of this effect and use it reflexively. Power is part of processes of 'politicisation', the denial of power part of its opposite, where 'nothing can be done'.

However, I do not think that, provided they stayed coherent, constructivists would fall into the realist fallacy which says that, since power is always related to politics, politics is always related to power. There is more to politics than that. This is not a plea to whitewash our social relations and make them appear 'power-free', as if they were not intersected by different social hierarchies (and, by the way, Habermas never meant that, hence I can avoid the stale, wrong and oblique reference to his work here). But it is perhaps worthwhile keeping in mind this Republican tradition and its relation to constructivism, as Nick Onuf (Onuf 1998) has done, or developing the Arendtian tradition, where politics, indeed power, is about the capacity to do things together, where the reference point is the common good and the endeavour is public virtue. And it would also be worth following up Friedrich Kratochwil's comprehensive attempt to construct a consistent constructivist research programme where it is not power politics, but human practice that makes the links (Guzzini 2010) between a political ontology, an explanatory theory (with consistent meta-theory) and a foreign policy praxis, from his first article on *The concept of politics* (Kratochwil 1971) via the *Puzzles of Politics* (Kratochwil 2011) to his last opus magnum on *Praxis* (Kratochwil 2018). If practical knowledge is the starting point,

why not theorise practice as a privileged way to find coherence and find the basis for a 'pragmatic' understanding of foreign policy strategy? Throughout his career, Kratochwil repeatedly mobilises classical realism for this purpose (Kratochwil 1978, 1993).

All this surely does not happen in a power-free environment, but not all politics can be shoehorned into a theory of domination. It is not reducible to it. Otherwise, at least for a constructivist interested in the power politics of process, with the realist (fallacious) reversal of power politics, our ontological assumptions and concepts of politics do not just innocently represent social reality, they intervene in it: we turn the Schmittian definition of politics in terms of the friend-foe relationship into a self-fulfilling prophecy. And this is precisely the non-reflexive and non-prudential outcome that Barkin warns us about. Hence, why not shed this realist ontology? Perhaps the only truly coherent way to save a realist policy of prudence is to decouple it from the realist ontology of power politics.

CONCLUSION: REALIST PRUDENCE AS CONSTRUCTIVIST FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY?

Although not very well known, a constructivist foreign policy strategy of prudence does exist, whose similarities to classical realist maxims are not hard to see. A prime example is the Copenhagen School of Security Studies, also called 'securitisation theory' (Buzan, Wæver et al. 1998). Despite its name, its origins lie in a particular foreign policy *strategy* that it theorised as 'de-securitisation': German *Ostpolitik* (Wæver 1995). *Ostpolitik* basically worked through a bargain.⁵ It offered the Eastern bloc acceptance of its territorial expansion, enshrining the post-1945 borders, and also a kind of sphere of influence. But by accepting those borders and giving them certainty, it plausibly negotiated a different meaning for them, one that was less dangerous and more porous. By enshrining the status quo, it made change possible. By 'de-securitising' territorial and hence classical security relations, it made 'normal politics' possible and so moved beyond a perennial state of emergency that justifies militarism and authoritarianism at home and a narrow security definition of the national interest abroad. It was predicated on the idea of a *process* in which roles and images, indeed identities and interests, could be revised: the Helsinki process. Hence, the border treaties were not an end in themselves, but a means to launch that process.

This strategy is not outside classical realist concerns of power – indeed, it can be seen as being driven by those already shared by classical realists, to avoid power politics being turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, it does not just apply a static vision where one should avoid containment policies when relations are on the 'pole of indifference', lest it makes actors unnecessarily antagonistic, nor avoid

⁵ For analyses, see, for instance, Helga Haftendorn (1986: 269-381). For a perspective on Willy Brandt's 'Weltinnenpolitik' (world domestic politics), see Anna Caffarena (2002) and Dieter Senghaas (1992).

appeasement strategies when relations are characterised by the 'pole of power', lest it encourages an already existing antagonism (Wolfers 1962) – a dualism later developed in Jervis' (1976) spiral and deterrence model. *Ostpolitik* thinks about politics *in flux*. It is in its patient practice of potentially re-drawing the lines and identities – *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through rapprochement), *Politik der kleinen Schritte* (politics in small steps), *Entspannungspolitik mit langem Atem* (détente politics having the breath for a long haul) – that a prudential conflict resolution can reside.⁶ From early on, classical (or simply idiosyncratic) realists like Philip Windsor (1971, 2002) and Pierre Hassner (1972) suggested the advantages of such a foreign policy strategy, endorsing Ostpolitik's idea of 'evolutionary change within existing institutions leading to a qualitative change involving a new system' (Hassner 1968: 17). And Hassner later integrated the findings of the Copenhagen School into his own analysis. It may well be 'constructivism all the way down' if a realist foreign policy of prudence is to be saved.

⁶ There are clear similarities here with Yaqing Qin's (2018) relational and process understanding of politics.

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