Conceptions of global political transformation: a critical exploration of ideational and normative approaches

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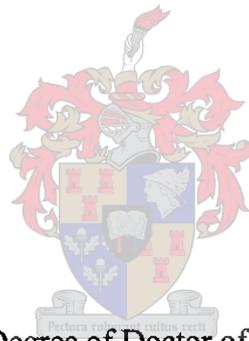
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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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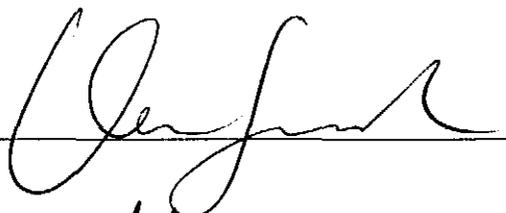
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Abstract

The post-Cold War era has witnessed a renewed interest in global political transformation and the possibility of the emergence of a new global order. There are, however, widespread disagreements within the field of International Relations (IR) about the significance of the discontinuities of our age, which include the emergence of centres of economic and political power that erode state autonomy and sovereignty. While some theorists argue that these changes are largely insignificant, others regard them as potential harbingers of a fundamentally different future political system. The study of change in IR is thus marked by considerable confusion and hampered by a number of shortcomings.

One of the main deficiencies in the existing transformation literature has been the mainstream approaches' reluctance to concede that the study of change is an unavoidably normative endeavour. Additionally, much work on change has focused on the role that material factors play in facilitating change, while the role of ideational factors has been disregarded. This has lead to an incomplete and distorted view of the process of change. Lastly, guidelines by which one might evaluate and choose between contending approaches to change are sorely lacking. These issues are addressed in this study by means of an evaluation of the work of three selected authors (Alexander Wendt, John Ruggie and Robert Cox) whose combined contributions can assist us in developing a more comprehensive theory of global political transformation.

It is contended that, in order for the study of change in IR to progress, scholars need to recognise the inherently normative nature of the undertaking, and be explicit about their normative assumptions. Furthermore, clarity needs to be reached with regard to the materialism-idealism debate. The argument made is that a middle ground approach, which aims to transcend the false dichotomy between material and ideational factors, is required. In fact, it is maintained that not only is a conciliatory approach conducive to progressing the study of change in terms of the materialism-idealism debate, but that such an approach of theoretical engagement and bridge building will also contribute generally to developing a more thorough understanding of global change.

Finally, if we want to make progress in IR thinking about change, we need to develop some criteria to determine which authors can assist us best. Subsequently it is proposed that a satisfactory approach to the study of change in IR should, at a minimum, fulfil the following requirements. It should (1) aim to transcend the false dichotomy between materialism and idealism; (2) be explicit about its normative position; (3) limit normative visions to what constitutes viable alternatives global political systems; and (4) identify sources of change and include a proposed plan of action of how to achieve normative goals. In light of the above criteria, it is also contended that progressive global political transformation does not, as some transformative authors suggest, have to entail the demise of the state. It is quite possible that emancipatory change can take place within the confines of the Westphalian system.

In summary, this study hopes to make some contribution to what is a vastly complex topic – that of change in and of the global political system – by addressing three shortcomings identified in the existing change literature: the fact that the role of ideas and the normative implications of change have been sorely neglected, and the need for criteria by which one might choose between contending normative projects.

Opsomming

In die post-Koue Oorlog era het daar 'n hernieude belangstelling in globale politieke transformasie en die moontlikheid van die totstandkoming van 'n nuwe globale orde ontstaan. Daar is egter gewigtige verskille binne die veld van Internasionale Betrekkinge (IB) oor die belang van huidige veranderings soos die ontstaan van sentra van ekonomiese en politieke mag, wat state se outonomiteit en soewereiniteit bedreig. Terwyl sommige skrywers beweer dat hierdie veranderings grootliks onbeduidend is, sien ander hulle as potensiële aanduidings van 'n fundamenteel nuwe politieke stelsel. Die studie van verandering in IB word dus gekenmerk deur aansienlike verwarring en word belemmer deur 'n aantal tekortkominge.

Een van die vernaamste gebreke in die bestaande transformasie literatuur is die hoofstroom benaderings se onwilligheid om toe te staan dat die studie van verandering 'n onvermydelik normatiewe poging is. Bykomend fokus baie werk wat reeds oor verandering gedoen is op die rol wat materiële faktore speel in die fasilitering van verandering, terwyl die rol van idees en norme verontagsaam word. Dit het gelei tot 'n onvolledige en verwronge beeld van die veranderingsproses. Laastens is riglyne waarvolgens wedywerende benaderings tot verandering geëvalueer sou kon word, afwesig. Dié kwessies word in hierdie studie aangespreek deur middel van 'n evaluering van die werk van drie geselekteerde outeurs (Alexander Wendt, John Ruggie en Robert Cox) wie se gesamentlike bydraes 'n beduidende bydrae kan lewer tot die ontwikkeling van 'n meer omvattende teorie van globale politieke transformasie.

Daar word beweer dat, ten einde vordering in die studie van verandering te bewerkstellig, teoretici die inherent normatiewe aard van die poging moet herken, en eksplisiet moet wees oor hul normatiewe aannames. Verder moet daar duidelikheid bereik word ten opsigte van die materialisme-idealisme debat. Die argument wat gemaak word is dat 'n middeweg benadering, wat ten doel stel om die valse digotomie tussen die materiële en die ideële te oorkom, benodig word. Daar word verder geargumenteer dat so 'n konsiliërende benadering nie net bevorderlik is vir vooruitgang in die studie van verandering in terme van die materialisme-idealisme debat nie, maar dat 'n benadering wat gegrond is op teoretiese bemiddeling ook in 'n algemene sin voordelig is vir 'n meer deeglike begrip van globale verandering. Laastens, indien vooruitgang in huidige denke oor verandering bewerkstellig wil word, is dit noodsaaklik om kriteria te ontwikkel ten einde te bepaal watter outeurs se werk as grondslag vir verdere teoretisering moet dien. Op grond hiervan word voorgestel dat 'n bevredigende benadering tot die studie van verandering in IB ten minste aan die volgende voorwaardes moet voldoen: dit behoort (1) daarna te streef om die valse digotomie tussen materialisme en idealisme te oorbrug; (2) eksplisiet te wees oor die normatiewe aannames wat gemaak word; (3) normatiewe visies te beperk tot lewensvatbare alternatiewe globale politieke stelsels; en (4) bronne van verandering te identifiseer en 'n voorgestelde plan van aksie in te sluit oor hoe normatiewe doelwitte bereik kan word. In die lig van bogenoemde kriteria word daar ook geargumenteer dat progressiewe globale politieke transformasie nie, soos wat sommige transformasie skrywers suggereer, noodwendig die ondergang van die staat behels nie. Dit is moontlik dat emansiperende verandering binne die beperkings van die statestelsel kan plaasvind.

Opsommend stel hierdie studie ten doel om 'n bydrae te lewer tot 'n uiters komplekse tema – naamlik verandering in en van die globale politieke stelsel – deur drie tekortkominge wat in die bestaande literatuur geïdentifiseer is, aan te spreek: die feit dat die rol van idees en die normatiewe implikasies van verandering grootliks verwaarloos is, en die behoefte aan kriteria waarvolgens daar tussen wedywerende normatiewe projekte gekies kan word.

Acknowledgements

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction, Problem, and Approach

1.1. The issue of change in International Relations

1.1.1 Why change?

Change is an ever-present characteristic of life, and yet scholars from all disciplines struggle to describe this apparently common phenomenon. Or perhaps it is precisely the omnipresence of change that makes it so difficult to study. As Jervis (2001:281) rightly states, "Variation, change, and transition are among the most vexing problems of international politics for theorists and practitioners alike". The complexity and vague nature of the subject matter has not, however, discouraged scholars to pursue explorations of it, with the phenomenon of change also constituting a central issue for many, albeit not all, International Relations (IR) scholars.

Before embarking on any particular study, it is important to ask why the subject under consideration is worth exploring in more detail. So, following this line of thinking one could ask why there is a need to focus on change in order to enhance our understanding of international relations. Maclean (1981:49) proposes an answer to this question, namely, "...if it is the case that change is intrinsic to social relations, that is, part of what is actually meant by them, then any adequate explanation of the latter must take account of change". Similarly, Buzan and Jones (1981:1-2) maintain, "...an ability to account for change is a necessary condition for successful theoretical development". It follows then that we cannot arrive at a satisfactory understanding of international relations if we disregard the issue of change. This assumption has important implications for traditional IR theories like realism that focus on continuity

rather than change. Before exploring these implications, let us consider the significance of change in international relations today.

Throughout the evolution of what we now know as the international system, interaction across political boundaries has undergone a number of fundamental changes. Before 1648[1], multiple quasi-international systems existed and change in these systems was dispersed and varied from region to region in the world. Because of a wide variety of types of political units, and the absence of interaction among all of them, these changes collectively and individually could not be termed 'systemic', as the word is used today; neither did the term 'international' apply in its current meaning. However, with the gradual emergence of nation-states, officially marked by the Peace of Westphalia, as the sole source of political and economic sovereignty, a truly universal system of states (an *international* system) came into being. Henceforth, systemic change implied a global phenomenon of epochal dimensions. The change from a medieval plurality of political entities of various types to the modern international system of states constitutes what can be termed a *systemic global political transformation*.

One of the major advantages of the counter-realist tendency in current IR literature is that the theme of global political transformation and the possibility of the emergence of a new global order has received increased attention. The counter-realist challengers emphasise the emerging discontinuities of our age as harbingers of the potential for transformation. These discontinuities include the emergence of centres of economic and political power that erode state autonomy and sovereignty, the rise of transnational social movements, the emergence of supra- and sub-national political communities, and the general dispersal of political identity.

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[1] 1648 refers to the year in which a series of treaties, subsequently known as the Peace of Westphalia, was signed, ending the Thirty Years' War, and formalising the emergence of a new system of political organisation, namely the system of states. The date is to be viewed purely as marker of more broad-ranging and gradual changes which occurred over centuries, signalling a formal, legal recognition of what had been developing over a long period of time. For an introduction to the debate surrounding the relevance of the date, see: Osiander, A. (2001) "Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth" in *International Organisation*, vol.55, issue 2: 251 –288; and Teschke, B. (2003) *The Myth of 1648: Class, geopolitics, and the Making of Modern International Relations*. London: Versa.

The literature dealing with these discontinuities is large and constantly growing. Constraints relating to time and space obviously limit the number of scholars that it is possible to consider in detail. Given these inevitable constraints, three scholars were selected, namely: Alexander Wendt, John Gerard Ruggie and Robert W. Cox. The research foci identified below will largely be approached by means of an evaluation of their work, and their selection is thus also closely related to their respective contributions to these research questions. Even though there are many differences between the three authors, they share an interest in developing an approach that focuses on the possibility of global political transformation. They stand out in terms of the depth of their analyses, their theoretical sophistication, and the explicitness of their visions of a transformed world. What further distinguishes these authors from other transformation scholars is the extent to which they have chosen to incorporate existing realist assumptions, instead of rejecting them on the grounds of their inability to explain change. Whilst retaining some realist premises, they are, however, also very critical of realism's shortcomings, and arguably go beyond revision of realism in their work[2]. Each one pushes the boundaries of realism on particular issues, making new insights and new opportunities for emancipatory praxis possible.

Given the renewed interest in global change there is, however, widespread dissent within the IR community regarding the significance of the changes we have witnessed in recent decades. While some argue that these changes are largely insignificant, and that the international system has consequently remained unchanged, others maintain that the changes are in fact of a fundamental nature, and have brought about, or are in the process of bringing about, a transformation of the structure of global politics. Others maintain that significant changes are taking place, but that this does not necessarily imply the demise of the state system. The answer to the question 'what has changed in the global system' involves issues of epistemology and ontology. Different views regarding transformation and whether we are currently witnessing a

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[2] This is in contrast to some scholars who have chosen to reject neorealist premises altogether, and others who have opted to work within its framework and make incremental revisions to provide for change. Buzan and Little (2000), for example, subscribe to the position put forward by Holsti (1985:viii) that, if realism is found to be lacking in terms of its description of reality, it should not be discarded in favour of a new alternative world vision, but should instead be given a face lift, in the form of "new departures" of inquiry. They largely retain Waltz's framework but add a new dimension, namely "interaction capacity" in an attempt to account for the source or mechanism of change.

transformation depend on different approaches regarding how to acquire knowledge, and what constitutes the international system. These issues will therefore receive sufficient attention throughout the study.

The apparent confusion surrounding change and transformation of the international system leads to a number of questions, such as: What are the criteria for a process of systemic transformation to be brought about? Is change mostly driven by material factors or by ideas? Is there any or significant evidence supporting the notion that such a fundamental change is currently underway in the international system? Are existing IR theories able to explain transformation and to predict what the world will look like in the future? Are these theories engaged in explicit or implicit politico-normative projects to maintain the status quo or to promote a particular form of change, or to direct change in such a way that it will benefit a particular section of the human race? Exploring possible answers to some of these questions is the initial rationale behind this study. Given the turbulent nature of the current era, the final answer to 'why study change' is provided by Cox. He asserts, "What current events have brought into prominence, scholarship has an obligation to subject to critical analysis" (1996:494).

Given the diversity of questions requiring answers, this study aims to contribute to the development of the study of global political transformation by focusing on three issues, namely:

(1) recognising the inherently normative nature of studying change in IR;
(2) exploring the interplay between material and ideational factors in change;
(3) developing a preliminary set of criteria on the grounds of which contending approaches to change in IR may be assessed.

This will largely be done by means of an evaluation of the contributions of the three selected authors to these issues. The reasons for the choice of research foci are outlined below.

1.1.2 The normative nature of studying change in IR

Mainstream approaches to IR's failure to account for changes leading to the end of the Cold War resulted in an urgent need for theoretical innovation in the last decade of the 20th century. Part of the mainstream, and particularly neorealism's, poor understanding of change is related to the claim that neorealism has stripped IR of normative concerns that were – in a somewhat diluted form – present in the Classical Realism of Hans Morgenthau[3]. Neorealists argue that "...fragile international arrangements will be disturbed if states pursue normative aspirations without regard for the constraints of anarchy", and that "the necessitous character of world politics also reaffirms the traditional realist critique of the emancipatory project" (Linklater, 1990:13).

We have to ask ourselves why it is important for a study of global political transformation to concentrate on this particular aspect of IR theory. Few scholars of IR, regardless of their theoretical orientations, would deny that the current global system is facing a large number of problems. These include overpopulation, a shortage of natural resources, extreme inequalities both between and within states, widespread poverty and disease, and environmental degradation, to mention but a few. Wapner (2000:5) summarises the situation, claiming, "the current world order supports too many forms of injustice to merit unconditional normative support". It has now become a commonplace assumption that the world cannot continue along this path for very long. Something has to give – or change. Although these problems are of a divergent nature – some economic, some ecological, some cultural, and some political, they all require political solutions, first and foremost. It therefore seems inevitable that the field of IR needs to develop conceptions of fundamental global political change which will address these problems and lead to an alternative global political system. There needs to be much more focus on how the world could or should be, and what kind of political system might be able to mitigate some of the most pressing problems facing the world today. What is required is normative theory.

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[3] "A political science which is true to its moral commitment ought at the very least to be an unpopular undertaking. At its very best, it cannot help being a subversive and revolutionary force with regard to certain vested interests – intellectual, political, economic, social in general" (Morgenthau, quoted in Neufeld, 1995:122).

According to Frost (1983:81) questions of a normative nature in IR have to do with the moral problem of choosing goals to be pursued and means to legitimately pursue those goals.

To date, however, many studies of change have focused on what is likely to happen in future instead of what *ought* to happen. In other words, there is a tendency to shy away from normative theory[4]. Frost (1996:11) suggests that possible reasons for this are the epistemological and methodological bias in IR toward objective explanation (i.e. the distinction between facts and values), and moral scepticism, or a belief that normative theorising is inferior to other types. The other reason, of course, stems from the outcome of the first 'great debate' in IR. As a result of the realist 'victory' over idealism, any advocates of purposeful, progressive, change were consequently accused of impracticality and utopianism. Smith (1992:491) adds, "In some cases there are clear political reasons for rejecting normative theory, namely that it raises types of questions that challenge the values of dominant academics".

The assertion here is also that there are dangers inherent in refusing to be explicit about one's normative assumptions. For example, positivist approaches like neorealism, which purport not to take normative concerns into account, are in fact biased towards supporting the status quo and thus serve to obstruct progressive change. The result of neorealism's concern with continuity and a logic of reproduction has been not only a neglect of the possibilities for change, but in fact a stifling of transformative potential. By giving to the social order, "which is nothing more than the conventional activities of its members, together with their beliefs, expectations and desires – the qualities of an object which exists irrespective of the ideas of men" (Fay, 1975: 59), the basic social institutions of the society it is studying as well as its structural relationships are reified. Therefore, by taking these basic social arrangements as granted, they are implicitly supported. This leads to an ideological bias in favour of this particular form of organisation. In other words, by emphasising continuity, these allegedly value-free approaches are in fact perpetuating a particular worldview, giving them a normative content. Holsti (1998:30-31)

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[4] This should not be interpreted as maintaining that no normative work is being done in IR. See, for example, Ruiz and Wapner (2000) for a collection of contemporary normative IR scholarship.

expands on this point when he writes, "To view and explain world politics in utilitarian, economist, mechanistic and structural terms, as Waltz did, leads the analyst implicitly to say that because the world is this way, this is the way it ought to be." For all these reasons, one can thus say the positivist model of social science is fallacious because it claims to be value-free when it clearly is not. It follows that not only are neorealists unable to explain change, but that they also tend to suppress their normative implications.

Despite this apparent opposition to normative theorising, it should thus be clear that it is in fact impossible to engage in IR theorising without, consciously or subconsciously, making certain normative assumptions. Fay (1975:16) notes that, not only do values play a role in scientific enquiry, but that any theory of knowledge has an (implicit) notion of the relationship between theory and practice and that this notion in itself amounts to a political theory. Smith (1992:490) agrees that the issue is not that the field of IR needs to concern itself more with normative issues, but rather that "the subject is unavoidably normative". This is especially so with regard to the study of change, as the analysis of change cannot take place from a detached, neutral position.

In summary, what is being asserted here is thus that studying change is inevitably a normative undertaking. This issue is again addressed in Section 1.3.3. The implication is also that choosing between contending conceptions of change is in itself a normative question. Our three authors make important contributions in this regard: while Cox explicitly addresses normative issues, the work of the other two also raises issues in this regard.

1.1.3 The materialism-idealism[5] debate and change

In addition to the lack of normative concerns, a number of scholars have pointed out the tendency in IR to neglect the role of ideas in change. For example, many critics have taken issue with neorealism's exclusively materialist view of structure – in other

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[5] Although the debate is usually referred to as the 'materialism-idealism' debate, some authors have opted to substitute 'idealism' with 'ideationalism' or 'idea-ism' in order to avoid confusion with the philosophical perspective and the IR theory of 'idealism'.

words regarding structure as the distribution of material capabilities under anarchy. One factor contributing to this perceived neglect of ideational factors is what Ruggie (1998a:xi) terms "the postwar aversion to idealism". He also holds that the ascendancy of neorealism and neoliberalism further served to sideline the inclusion of ideational factors. This trend was aided by the discipline's adoption of a positivist approach to the study of international phenomena.

Many scholars have, for decades, relied on largely material explanations of change and other developments in the global system. The result has been that mainstream approaches do not problematise the interests and identities of actors, instead treating them as exogenous and given. In other words, while states are said to act in self-interest, no attempt is made to find answers to questions relating to how these particular interests came about, or how they could change. Neither do they consider the intersubjective nature of international relations and the role that agents play in relation to structure. This results in an incomplete picture of how the international system functions and, more significantly, how it can be transformed. If, instead of treating states' interests and identities as given, one tries to find answers to how they were created, this clears the path for exploring questions relating to how those identities and interests can change, ultimately shaping and transforming the international system as a whole.

In response to the *a priori* exclusion of ideas, a number of studies ended up on the opposite end of the spectrum, practising ideational determinism. Extreme materialism and extreme idealism are the two poles of what has become known as the materialism-idealism debate. In its most general sense, this debate concerns the relative importance of material forces and ideas in the social structure. Whilst a materialist position advocates that international relations is predominantly shaped by the material structure of the international system, for idealists, international relations is not only affected, but also constituted by language, ideas, beliefs, and intersubjective understandings. In terms of change, materialists assert that material factors override ideas as the main forces of order and change in the international system, while for idealists, continuity and change are viewed as ideas-driven.

To satisfactorily explain and understand global political transformation requires that we get clarity on the ideas-materialism debate in IR. The view advocated here is that, in order to contribute to the understanding of change in IR, more conciliatory approaches that attempt to transcend the false dichotomy between idealism and materialism are required. The argument made in this study is that both extreme idealism and extreme materialism contain serious problems. A middle ground approach which avoids these extremes thus appears to be the only way forward, although it, too, is not without its challenges. *A middle ground position to the materialism-idealism debate is thus being advocated here as best able to contribute to progressing the study of change in IR.* The middle ground is premised on the notion that our theories about the world always contain elements of ideas and material factors. It is especially important to be aware of the effects of both on large-scale change – for it is the interplay of these that ultimately brings about transformation.

Adopting a middle ground approach to the materialism-idealism debate also raises questions about more general attempts at theoretical engagement and reconciliation. To this end, the benefits and drawbacks of theoretical bridge building in terms of making progress in the study of change, and the field of IR more generally, need to be explored. This particular focus further justifies the choice of Wendt, Ruggie and Cox as all three authors deal with aspects of the materialism-idealism debate in innovative and instructive ways and, crucially, relate it to change. Ultimately, despite their differences, all three advocate a 'middle ground' approach to the debate, and engage in a certain amount of theoretical bridge building. While Ruggie and Wendt focus first on the role of ideas and then bring in material factors, Cox starts from a (Marxist) material base, from where he calls for the inclusion of ideas. By combining the contributions of these three authors we can make some progress in developing the outlines of a middle ground position that avoids both materialist determinism and the danger of treating ideas as being completely independent from material reality.

1.1.4 Choosing between rival approaches to change

If we want to make progress in IR thinking about change, we need to develop some criteria to determine which authors can assist us best. Hence, my third research focus is to develop some preliminary criteria for evaluating contending approaches to global

political transformation. The rationale and method for choosing between contending approaches will come under the spotlight in section 1.3.4.

It needs to be said at the outset that no claim is made that the criteria are original. While some are developed directly as a result of a close reading of the work of our three selected authors, others are drawn, and adapted, from the work and *a priori* assumptions of a number of authors - Neufeld (1995), Bernstein (1983) and Fay (1975) in particular. They, in turn, are strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School critical theorists. The criteria are thus based on an extensive foundation of philosophical work. The aim here is to select from a broad range of requirements for 'good theory' those that could be used to distinguish between the normative content of contending theories of *change*, and develop these criteria by evaluating the contributions of Wendt, Ruggie and Cox.

From the previous two sections two potential criteria have already come to the fore. Given the importance of the normative dimensions of change established above, one criterion should be how explicit an author is about his or her normative assumptions. Secondly, given the interconnectedness of the materialism-idealism debate and conceptions of change, another criterion should relate to authors' contributions to this issue. In other words, one could hold that only approaches that take the role of ideas seriously, and are able to reconcile material and ideational factors, are able to make valuable contributions to the study of change in IR. The two other criteria relate to the viability of the normative project, and the identification of sources of change. The first is aimed at avoiding the pitfalls of extreme idealism and utopianism. It proposes that approaches to change should develop feasible normative futures on the basis of existing constraints. The second refers to whether approaches to change are able to identify the mechanisms of transformation, and include recommendations for action that can be followed by agents who have an interest in global political transformation.

In light of the above criteria, ultimately, the question also has to be asked whether the normative goal of progressive change and global emancipation can and should be advanced within the prevailing state system. In other words, whilst it is important to explore global changes that involve moving beyond the state system, taking into

account the feasibility criterion, IR scholars may need to (re-)shift their focus to the possibilities for normative change within the state system.

1.2 Summary of arguments

In summary, and in light of the above research foci, a number of arguments are thus put forward in this study. The arguments are developed in conjunction with the contributions made by Wendt, Ruggie and Cox to the various issues under discussion. *Firstly,* IR theorising, and the study of change in IR in particular, are deemed to be unavoidably normative endeavours. *Secondly,* the neglect of the role of ideas in global transformation has also been highlighted, leading to the argument that focusing only on material – or ideational – factors results in an impoverished representation of the process of and potential for global political transformation. It is therefore proposed that, in order to avoid the shortcomings associated with both extreme materialism and extreme idealism, a middle ground approach which aims to transcend the false dichotomy between material and ideational factors should be adopted. *Thirdly,* the view taken here is that not only is a conciliatory approach conducive to progressing the study of change in terms of the materialism-idealism debate, but that an approach of theoretical engagement and bridge building in a general sense is beneficial in terms of developing a more thorough understanding of global change. *Fourthly,* a number of criteria are proposed by which one might evaluate different conceptions of change and contending normative projects. These include criteria emerging from points made above, namely the necessity of being aware of and explicit about one's normative assumptions and goals, and the need to take both material and ideational factors into account if one wishes to provide a comprehensive study of global political transformation. The development of such criteria is regarded as being essential not only to advancing the *study* of change, but also in terms of facilitating a global political transformation towards a more equitable system. *Finally,* it is contended that progressive global political transformation does not, as some transformative authors like Linklater, Ashley and others suggest, have to entail the demise of the state. It is quite possible that emancipatory change can take place within the confines and borders of the Westphalian system.

1.3   Theoretical approach

1.3.1   Epistemological and methodological issues

The underlying assumption of this study is that an understanding of the international system must be located in a broader philosophical context. This can be justified on the basis that some fundamental issues of earlier metatheoretical debates continue to be relevant to the field of IR, and especially the topic of transformation under consideration here.

As already mentioned, the research will be conducted by means of an evaluative strategy, involving an in-depth review and evaluation of the work of the three selected authors – Wendt, Ruggie and Cox, especially as it relates to the understanding of transformation in IR. An attempt will be made to establish a conversation between the authors in order to identify areas of agreement and difference between them, ultimately aimed at developing integrated answers to the research foci posed above. The matter of reasoned discourse and the viability of engagement and comparison between contending approaches inevitably brings up the issue of incommensurability. Section 1.3.4 will attempt to deal with this issue in some detail. The predominantly evaluative nature of this endeavour is justified on the premise that it is, to a large degree, by interpreting existing work that fundamental argument is conducted in the social sciences.

In order to best achieve the stated aims of the study, the overarching approach adopted here is a critical[6] one. This means that there will be a strong normative focus on the idea of emancipation, based on the belief that one of the aims of theory is to challenge the injustices and inequalities that are built into the current world order and that the dominant traditions treat as given. The positivistic logic of investigation is rejected, together with the positivistic either/or claim that social research is either empirical and based on scientific methods or normative and subjective. This has a number of implications.

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[6] The term 'critical theory' will be used here in its broader, more generic sense, i.e. not only in reference to the particular version of Critical Theory associated with the Frankfurt School.

While an objectivist approach is rejected, so too is a postmodernist subjectivist approach that holds that reality is entirely a creation of the subject, and that all opinions thus have equal validity. It is believed that the weaknesses of positivism can be overcome without lapsing into subjectivism. The proposition is to adopt the position suggested by critical theory, namely that the way in we understand the world that exists out there is tightly bound to our experience of and engagement with it.

The rejection of the positivist 'truth as correspondence' tenet leads to the de-validation of the idea that rival paradigms can be compared according to a common standard – namely how well they correspond to the real world. However, the approach adopted here also rejects the notion that, by accepting the fact that competing paradigms are incommensurable as a result of the socially constructed nature of standards, we also rule out the possibility of reasonable comparison. For these reasons, no attempt will be made to hold the approaches under investigation to any so-called independent or objective standards or criteria. At the same time, it is necessary to point out here that this study does not wish to advance a radical relativist position, for such an approach would not allow one to make statements regarding how the world should be. Relativism here is not to be confused with subjectivism, the latter referring to choices made on the basis of personal bias or opinion, while the former - as understood in terms of this study - rejects the idea that there are universal standards against which one can compare and evaluate rival theories. This study therefore starts from the premise that there is a reality, but that it can be interpreted in various ways. As Wight (1996:309) points out, we can assume that rival theories describe the world in different ways, but it would make no sense to argue that they are in fact describing different worlds, as "…in what sense could we [then] say that they were rivals?"

This leads us to the next point, namely that the approach followed here is one that also categorically rejects the positivist notion that value-free theory is possible, in other words that it is possible to separate fact from value. That which is being observed (in this case the different approaches' conceptualisation of global political transformation) is inextricably linked to the values held by and the perspective subscribed to by the observer. Surprisingly perhaps, it is one of the leading figures of

Classical Realism, Hans Morgenthau, who noted, "The perspective of the observer determines what can be known and how it is to be understood" (1959:21).

It is therefore clear that a scholar's underlying beliefs about the influence and role of theory has a major effect on his or her approach to the study of change. The role of social scientists in not only analysing change, but being part of the process of change is an issue that is often neglected in mainstream IR. Holsti subscribes to an even stronger view of the role of scholars, making an appeal "...to emancipate ourselves from Waltz-like projects because of the necessary connection between thought and practice. International theories are not just abstract playthings of academics. Their elaboration has political consequences and thus the answer to the question 'why study' is ultimately to demolish all intellectual projects that sustain the *status quo* and other evils in the world" (1998:31).

Another aspect of theory that has value implications is the ontological assumptions made by scholars not only about what is reality, but also what part of reality is worthy of being researched. This study thus subscribes to the main principles of theoretical reflexivity, including self-consciousness about underlying premises and the recognition of the inherently politico-normative dimension of paradigms. To this end, it is assumed that knowledge is always relative to the questions raised for study. Researchers therefore make priority judgements when they focus on one issue, inevitably to the exclusion of others.

With regard to the more general value of theoretical reflexivity, one might ask whether (and how) critical self-reflection by IR scholars will contribute to achieving emancipation in a practical sense. The answer must be that critical theorising highlights the possibilities for emancipation, which may or may not be taken up in practice. Of course, self-reflection has inherent advantages. As Haacke (1996:284) notes, it has "...undoubtedly assisted many students in IR in liberating themselves from the vestiges of neorealism or structural Marxism". While it does not automatically lead to emancipation in the sense of the transformation of existing structures, it does serve to highlight the existing constraints, and to suggest the potential for transformation.

1.3.2 Conceptualisation

Before continuing, it is necessary to examine some of the concepts that have been mentioned and will be employed throughout the course of this study. This is a difficult task, as there is seldom consensus when it comes to the meaning of concepts used in the field of IR. Some terms are employed in only one paradigm, while others are used across the spectrum with sometimes broadly similar and, at other times, strongly divergent, meanings.

An evaluation of how these terms are interpreted by each of the selected authors will come under scrutiny in the chapters dealing with each of them, respectively. The objective of the following attempt at conceptualisation is, therefore, merely to provide a general introduction to the terms. It must also be noted that the process of conceptualisation can never be an objective one. To quote Smith (2000:576), concepts "...are not dictated by what we observe; they are either *a priori* in the mind, or they are the result of a prior theoretical language".

Which change?

As mentioned at the outset, change in some or other form is a constant feature of social interaction. What needs to be noted is that a considerable part of this ever-present change is, however, of little significance either to those affected by it or to those who observe it. In contrast, some changes are of considerable significance. The first type of constant, ubiquitous change does not provide a manageable subject matter for IR scholars, who are concerned with macro-phenomena at the international level. The focus in this study will thus be on fundamental change, or transformation. However, not only is consensus lacking on *what* has changed, but also on *how* one can distinguish minor changes from fundamental change.

The challenge is therefore to develop some sort of framework that provides a useful distinction between run-of-the-mill changes and fundamental transformation. This has proven to be an exceptionally difficult endeavour, however, as existing markers of global transformation are ill defined. Holsti (1998:2) has lamented, "we do not have even the beginning of a consensus on what constitutes change or transformation in political life". Even apparently major upheavals may sometimes disguise more basic

continuities, where the underlying continuity is more significant than the surface modification. Many IR scholars have grappled with the issue of trying to conceptualise change. Ruggie has said, "...we are not very good as a discipline at studying the possibility of fundamental discontinuity in the international system...We lack even an adequate vocabulary; and what we cannot describe, we cannot explain" (1998a:174-175).

Jones (1981:11) makes a particularly important point when he writes, "The role of theory in the identification of significant changes...is reflected in the part played by theory in the description of change itself. Viewing certain kinds of developments as significant depends upon prior conceptions, as does the description of the patterns exhibited with them". This is clearly visible in the practice of IR, where differing conceptions of what constitutes systemic transformation have resulted in large discrepancies between IR scholars with regard to what processes and changes, historically, qualify as constituting instances of systemic transformation.

So, for example, one of the main criticisms of realism, in particular Waltzian neorealism, is its inability to account for fundamental change in the international system. This criticism stems from neorealism's narrow view of systemic transformation. For Waltz (1979:66) "patterns recur, events repeat themselves endlessly", thus implying that the essentials of the international system have not changed and are not about to do so in the near future. In the end, Waltz concludes that the structure of international politics has only changed once (when the anarchical Westphalian state system replaced the hierarchical system of medieval pluralism). Jones (1981:15) rightly notes, "An approach that can only identify one significant change over such a momentous period of history is, irrespective of its internal coherence, clearly too blunt". As a result of this very exclusive perspective on change, many neorealists hold onto the idea that many principles or features of the international system are unchanging. As Ruggie (1998b:874) notes, neorealists claim that a theory of transformation is unnecessary because "not enough is happening in the world today to warrant a theory of transformation".

As a result of different conceptions of change, there exists a plethora of views regarding what the markers of change in the international system are. Holsti (1998)

develops a useful framework by which one can categorise various scholars' positions. He starts off by noting that "Change, like beauty and good skiing conditions, is in the eye of the beholder" (1998:4), and proceeds to distinguish between several popular markers of change, namely: trends, great events, great achievements (e.g. the golden age of Greece), and significant social or technological innovations.

Using trends (in other words quantitative changes such as population growth or increases in the number of states) to indicate change is tricky, as one is faced with the inevitable problem of: at what point do quantitative changes have qualitative consequences? Great events (e.g. major wars or the peace agreements following wars) are a more popular marker of change for social scientists. Historians, especially, are fond of breaking up their historical narratives with major discontinuities. However, as Holsti (1998:6) points out, "there is no guarantee that major events in fact alter typical patterns". Jones agrees when he states that while common sense would suggest that war constitutes a significant change, war is in fact a much more complex phenomenon. While it is obvious "that something has changed when two or more states resort to physical conflict", how much has changed, and what kind of change remains unclear (1981:12). This ambiguity is illustrated by the debate surrounding whether the end of the Cold War should be seen as constituting a major breaking point in international relations.

Finally, pointing to significant social or technological innovations as indicators of change has become widespread in IR, with scholars pointing out the transformative effects of the communication revolution, for example. At the same time, however, there is no consensus regarding the effects of innovation – some say it is bringing about the demise of the nation state while others argue it has strengthened it.

The above-mentioned markers only attempt to identify *when* change has taken place, but do not specify the *kind* of change. This is the next issue we need to explore. As Holsti (1998:7) notes, "Most authors fail to specify which kind they have in mind, yet the differences between them are theoretically important, perhaps even crucial in estimating the validity of claims". Whilst acknowledging that fundamental transformation should be distinguished from superficial change, and that it is important to develop stringent criteria for identifying significant change, one also has to be wary of, like Waltz, adopting an exclusive approach to change. Similarly,

however, we cannot regard every small change as significant. The challenge, therefore, is to find a balanced perception of change, based on practical and justifiable criteria. Many writers have accepted this challenge and attempted to distinguish between different types of change. Within the Marxist tradition, for example, it is believed that "significant change only takes place when there is a change of a wholesale kind, such that the structures of society which themselves condition the form of relations between people, change to produce a new, distinctive structure / mode of production" (Maclean, 1981:60).

Koslowski and Kratochwil (1995:134) distinguish between two types of change. The first, which they call within-system change, occurs "within the framework of well-established conventions", and "[R]eproduction of systemic structures is not affected". They cite changes in the balance of power as an example of this type of change. Fundamental change or transformation, on the other hand, occurs "when the practices and constitutive conventions of a social system are altered". Jones sets out a particularly useful definition of what constitutes structural transformation, without implying that less significant changes must be overlooked or mitigated. "Where any of the definitive elements of a structure are changed then that structure may be said to have been *transformed. Significant* changes may, however, take place without the governing structure being transformed", for example changes in actor weight or ranking, increases or decreases in important quantitative variables (Jones, 1981:16-17, emphasis in original).

Falk (1982:157-162) distinguishes between different *approaches* to change, namely system-maintaining, system-reforming and system-transforming approaches. In effect, he is writing about different types of change. System-reforming change refers to structural modifications that are however "not so fundamental as to call into question the basic ordering of international relations around the role and predominance of the sovereign state" (Falk, 1982:160). System-transforming approaches aim toward the construction of a new system. We need to also heed Falk's warning that "Reality, of course, does not divide as neatly as our analytic categories suggest" (1982:157).

Another writer who provides a useful distinction between different types of change in international relations is Gilpin (1981). He identifies three types of change:

1. *Interaction change* (refers to changing interstate relations within a given balance of power);

2. *Systemic change* (refers to the overall governance of the system, the number of great powers in it, and the shift in identity of the predominant powers, usually after a systemic war involving challenges to, and attempts to maintain, the existing distribution of power);

3. *Systems change* (refers to fundamental transformation of the actors and thus the nature of the system per se, e.g. the emergence of the state system or the change from empires to nation-states).

What is significant about Gilpin's conceptualisation of change is that his distinctions do not necessarily have to do with the *extent* of change, but rather with the *level* at which it takes place. A specific incidence of change may be large and significant – for instance, if bilateral and multilateral creditors would decide to write-off the debt of the poorest countries in one swoop – without affecting the basic power differentials structuring international relations, or the underlying shared understandings on which these relations are based. This is an important point to make, as the type of change which this study focuses on implies a fundamental restructuring of international relations.

Finally, it is necessary to briefly discuss the way in which the concepts 'change' and 'transformation' are used in the field of IR – as they have been used here – interchangeably. Holsti makes an important point when he argues that transformation is a particular type of change. He asserts that transformative change "can result from quantitative changes which, when accumulated over a period of time, bring new forms to life. But, logically, the new forms must derive from old patterns. They can partly replace old forms, but by definition they must include residues or legacies of the old. One cannot transform from nothing" (1998:9). He distinguishes it from other forms of change, including change as replacement and change as addition. He proposes using the idea of change as replacement to describe fundamental change, as it refers to a discontinuous type of change. In other words, "the characteristics of the new may be so fundamentally different from anything preceding that transformation is not an appropriate word" (Holsti, 1998:7-8). Finally, Holsti refers to within-system or

system-reforming change as "change as addition". This means that new phenomena do not have to replace existing ones, and old and new can coexist.

Holsti thus argues that claims of new world orders have turned out to be premature and that "the claims of replacement and transformation would be better classified as additions or dialectical synthesis, where elements of the old and the new coexist" (1998:9). Scholars should thus be careful of using phrases like "post-Westphalian system", as this would indicate a replacement type of change, which ultimately means that there must be few traces of Westphalia (i.e. states) remaining in it. It also follows "[t]hat we have more states, that we communicate more rapidly, or that we trade more within the context of a vastly expanded global population does not automatically entitle us to claim either discontinuity or transformation" (Holsti, 1998:9).

Although Holsti's comments are valuable, given the way in which the terms change and transformation are used by the majority of scholars in the field, including our three selected authors, they will not be used in the Holstian sense in this study. Instead, in view of this brief overview of different authors' distinctions between types of change, we can come to the conclusion that ultimately, *it is possible to distinguish between two forms of change*. The first, which different authors have called by different names (within-system, system-reforming or significant change) refers to changes which take place within the current global system (i.e. the state system), and serve to, for example, modify the behaviour of or distribution of power between the dominant actors. The other type of change (structural transformation, systems change, system-transforming change) is of a more deep-seated nature, and refers to "a fundamental rearrangement of structure so that a different configuration of actors with different orientations toward power, security, well-being and governance will emerge" (Falk, 1982:3). It would include not only a material, but also an ideational component relating to changes in the fundamentally shared understandings governing the global system. How the terms materialism and idealism will be understood in this study needs to be clarified here.

Materialism and Idealism

In this study, both terms will be used as umbrella terms to incorporate what might otherwise be viewed as distinct approaches, and it is therefore of particular importance to clarify exactly how these concepts are to be understood here.

Adapting the distinctions made by Adler[7] (1997:323-324) between different approaches to the ontological and epistemological debate about the reality of ideas, one can distinguish broadly between materialists, extreme idealists, and moderate or 'thin' idealists. **Materialists** assume the social world of international relations is a world shaped by the material structure of the international system. Furthermore, they hold that "material reality exists, regardless of perception or interpretation, and that what we know is a faithful representation of reality out there" (Adler, 2002:111, endnote 2). (Neo)realism, neoliberalism, and approaches that prioritise economic factors in their analyses of transformation (e.g. Marxists) would fall under this category, while **idealists** can be divided into:

(1) *Extreme idealists* who argue that the social world is constituted by language and ideas, and therefore that "the foundation for all knowledge is in the mind" (Adler, 2002:111, endnote 3). Postmodernists and poststructuralists would form part of this category;

(2) *'Thin'[8] idealists* who believe that social reality emerges from the attachment of meaning and functions to physical objects by means of collective understanding. While they assume that ideas construct meaning, they also recognise that social reality does exist beyond the theorist's view. The so-called conventional or modernist constructivists (including Wendt and Ruggie) make up this category.

From the outline above, it should be clear that we are dealing with complex ontological and epistemological issues which warrant a philosophical examination.

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[7] Following Woolgar (1983), Adler (1997:323-325) distinguishes between the reflective, the constitutive, and the mediative approaches to ideas.

[8] The adjective 'thin' is used here to depict a more moderate, conventional form of idealism as opposed to an extreme version. This follows the use of the term in the distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' constructivism by authors like Wendt (1999:2).

While the most common distinction between idealist and materialist positions is based on ontology, the position adopted here is the one put forward by Smith (2000:574) that one can see "neither ontology nor epistemology as prior to the other, but instead see the two of them as mutually and inextricably interrelated". The ontological and epistemological differences between materialist and idealist approaches will be more closely examined in Chapter 5.

Reference has been, and will be made throughout the study, to the IR approaches of (neo)realism and constructivism. It is thus also necessary to shed light on how they are to be understood in this context.

(Neo)realism

It is important to consider what is understood by the concepts realism and, more specifically, neorealism, as this is the IR paradigm in response to which the selected authors have developed their particular theoretical perspectives. It might be argued that a conceptualisation of this theoretical paradigm is superfluous, given its predominance in the field of IR, and the widespread familiarity with it amongst IR scholars. It is, however, precisely for this reason that an exploration of how the term is understood in the context of this study is warranted. The concept is often used in different contexts, under the assumption that it will be understood in the way that the author intended for it to be. Such unquestioning and uncritical application of concepts is of course a potentially dangerous enterprise as it could result in serious misunderstandings.

Realists - like other scholars who are banded together under one heading - do not form a completely homogeneous group. The particular strand of realism under discussion here is that of which Kenneth Waltz is said to the founding father - namely neorealism. Although they base their assumptions on that of Classical Realism, neo-realists do differ from their predecessors in a number of ways[9].

Although there is also a significant level of diversity amongst neorealists, they can be said to share a number of assumptions about international relations. In fact, despite a

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[9] See Burchill (1996: 85-86) for a comparison.

number of modifications over the years, the core tenets have remained the same. The first assumption is that the structure of the international system is the overriding explanatory element in international relations – especially the anarchic nature of the system. Neorealists believe that the anarchic nature of the international system determines the way that states behave towards each other. A further assumption is that states are the most important actors in the international arena and must consequently be the primary units of IR analysis. By this they do not deny the existence of other non-state actors, but they do believe it is unnecessary to focus on these other actors in trying to understand international relations. States, furthermore, are assumed to always behave in a rational manner, one which maximises their self-interest in relation to other states. While neorealists do not deny that it is possible to identify some instances of co-operation, these should not be regarded as fundamental systemic characteristics. States are conceptualised as unitary actors, meaning that the domestic characteristics of a state need not be taken into account in the study of international relations. Lastly, matters of national security – especially of the military and political kind – are believed to dominate the international agenda. The dominant theme in IR is believed to be the struggle for power between states. Significantly for this study, neorealism assumes that there is an underlying continuity in the international system, and that change is a highly unlikely and infrequent occurrence.

Finally, realism remains the most dominant theoretical paradigm within IR. Realists themselves would argue that the reason for this is that realism continues to be the theory that best describes and explains international relations. Others say the reason for its longevity is that realism most closely resembles the image of the world held by those who practice international politics. Another, more critical reason, is that realism is in fact a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that realists perpetuate a particular conception of international relations.

In terms of theoretical grounding, realism follows a conservative or traditional approach – in contrast with a critical or transformative one. It shares its epistemology with the natural sciences, and attempts to separate object and subject. Subjective phenomena such as norms and values are therefore excluded. As already noted, this inevitably leads to the neglect of normative commitments.

Constructivism[10]

Many critics claim that constructivism is now the main theoretical challenger to established perspectives within IR theory. It is particularly relevant to this study as two of our selected authors – Alexander Wendt and John Ruggie – work within the broader field of constructivism.

According to Nicholas Onuf, who first introduced the term in 1989, "[c]onstructivism is not a theory as such" in that it "...does not offer general explanations for things" (1998:60-61). Barkin (2003:325) provides a potential solution to what appear to be unresolvable contradictions between the variety of scholars all referring to themselves as constructivists. He suggests that, "[t]o claim that constructivism is an IR paradigm in the way that realism or liberalism are is misleading". He proposes that constructivism should rather be viewed – as it is by many scholars – as an ontology, epistemology or methodology. This opens up a wider range of potential applications for constructivism – if viewed as a methodological tool, for example, it could be compatible with a realist worldview. Ruggie (1998b:879-880) agrees when he asserts that "...constructivism is not itself a theory of international relations...but a theoretically informed approach to the study of international relations".

Kubalkova, Onuf and Kowert (1998:4) warn us against some of the myths and misunderstandings surrounding constructivism. One is that "constructivism is closely related to the 'post-modern' practice of 'deconstruction'...and that constructivism mandates an 'emancipatory' or 'critical' politics". Constructivism is not, by nature, optimistic or pessimistic. Adler emphasises that constructivism is not interested in "emancipation per se" (1997:333) nor, like critical theory, in uncovering the power structures that underlie the international system. At the same, this is not to say that constructivists are unconcerned with emancipatory progress in international relations. He summarises this idea in claiming, "[c]onstructivism is a set of paradigmatic lenses through which we observe *all* socially constructed reality, 'good' and 'bad'" (1997:336).

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[10] For an excellent discussion of constructivism see Adler, E. (2000) "Constructivism and International Relations" in Carlsnaes, W., Risse, T. and Simmons, B.A. (eds.) *Handbook of International Relations*. London: SAGE.

So what, then, characterises constructivism? According to Adler, the debate in IR about constructivism runs deep. In essence, it is a debate about the very nature of social science – between a naturalist and a social conception of social science (1997:320). Constructivists explore the issue of how the material world affects and is affected by ideas. The defining feature of constructivism is therefore a focus on the social construction of social reality, specifically the intersubjective aspect of this construction.

Constructivists thus reject the realist assumption that state behaviour is constrained by the anarchical nature of the international system. They hold that what realists conceive as inevitable givens are in fact social constructions that can be altered. They also reject the realist view that state interests are determined by the structure of the international system, and that they always act in self-interest. Instead, they claim that both states' interests and identities are constructed in an intersubjective manner, and that these intersubjective meanings are just as much a part of the international structure as are material capabilities. Some observers, notably Adler (1997:325-326) have argued that constructivism forms a middle ground both in terms of ontology (between materialism and idealism) and epistemology (between individualism and holism).

Given the plethora of scholars falling under the constructivist label, some writers have distinguished between various strands of constructivism, which differ on epistemological grounds. Ruggie (1998b:880-882), for example, identifies three strands. The first he terms neo-classical constructivism, due to the fact that it remains rooted in the classical tradition, is committed to the idea of a social science, and "typically includes an epistemological affinity with pragmatism". He includes himself, Kratochwil, Onuf and Finnemore in this category. The other side of the spectrum he calls postmodernist constructivism, based on the work of Nietzsche and stressing the linguistic construction of subjects. Walker, Der Derian and Ashley are included here. The final strand forms a middle way between the other two, and he calls it naturalistic constructivism. Although it "...shares certain features with mainstream theorizing, ...it is grounded in the philosophical doctrine of scientific realism" (1998b:881). Constructivists whose work can be said to fall into this category are Wendt and Dessler.

Finally, constructivism has been the subject of much criticism in IR. It has, for example, been pointed out that, while constructivism can offer much by way of added value to existing theories, it lacks its own research agenda. With regard to constructivism's focus on change it has been argued that, while it is able to elaborate on the cause and effect of change in international relations, this is mostly after change has occurred. The question thus remains: is constructivism able to predict change?

Finally, one of the most widespread criticisms against constructivism is its alleged inability to deal with 'real world' material factors like power. This issue will be taken up in the chapters dealing with Ruggie and Wendt, respectively, as well as in Chapter 5, which deals with the debate between materialism and idealism.

As was highlighted under the section on conceptualising change, many scholars refer to fundamental change in IR as being of a systemic or structural nature. We therefore also need to briefly explore how these terms are understood in the broader IR literature, and here.

International System

"The importance of the international system in IR thinking cannot be doubted. It represents one of the central concepts in the discipline; indeed it is so central that the term is often left undefined" (Buzan and Little, 2000:5). To avoid the trap of assuming that the reader and the writer's understanding of the term is the same, an attempt will be made to describe what the concept means in the context of this study. This is particularly important in light of arguments made later that are based on a particular understanding of the term international system.

At its most elemental, the idea of a system refers to the interrelationship between component parts. One of the most well-known definitions of the term in IR is provided by Hedley Bull, who also makes an important distinction between an international system of states and a society of states. According to him, "A system of states (or international system) is formed when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions, to cause them to behave – at least in some measure – as parts of a whole" (1995:9, emphasis in original). A society of states or international society, on the other hand, is a particular

form of international system in which the relationship between states is such that they share certain norms and values. Bull maintains that one can talk about a society of states "when a group of states, conscious of certain interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions" (1995:13).

The most basic difference in what IR scholars mean when they talk about the international system has to do with the actors they believe constitute that system. For some, notably realists, the international system refers only to state actors, while for others it includes a broad host of global actors ranging from international organisations - both intergovernmental and non-governmental - to multinational corporations and transnational social movements, as well as the interactions between these actors. Part of the confusion lies in the interpretation of the word 'international' which, strictly, only refers to relations between nation-states. Over the years, it has however become standard usage to employ the term in a much wider sense. One of the most thorough recent explorations of the term can be found in Buzan and Little's 2000 study *International Systems in World History*. They provide a very succinct definition, namely: "Generally, the international system is taken to be a shorthand way of referring to the nexus of actors and interactions that constitute the subject matter of international relations" (2000:5). They thus succeed in developing "an open-ended approach to international system which does not prejudge the nature of the dominant units in the system, privilege one sector of activity over another...or give precedence to one mode of explanation over another" (Buzan and Little, 2000:22).

To avoid misunderstandings, many scholars have chosen to replace 'international' with 'global' – as has been done in the title to this study. However, it has become generally accepted in IR that the term does not only refer to relations between nation-states, and, as this is also the assumption made by two of our selected authors – Wendt and Ruggie – the term 'international' will be used in its broader sense – i.e. interchangeably with 'global' throughout this study.

Structure

'Structure' is another overused and under-defined concept that IR scholars, in particular, are guilty of using without giving the meaning they attach to it much consideration. In much IR scholarship, the terms 'structure' and 'system' are often used interchangeably to mean one and the same thing. Onuf (1998:62) also points out that "[T]he term *structure* is the source of much confusion...because scholars cannot agree on whether structures exist in reality or only in their minds". He feels so strongly about the confusion it has caused that he calls on constructivists to consider dropping the term all together!

Structure in its most basic sense has to do with any persistent pattern of ordering. Hollis and Smith (1990:108) define structure as "the arrangement of the parts within a system and the principle of the arrangement". For some IR scholars, the structure of the international system refers to the underlying ordering pattern of actors in the world, while for others its refers to patterns of behaviour between actors. While it is generally regarded as a neutral term, for some, notably Marxists, world systems and dependency theorists, it has a distinctly negative implication, referring to relations of dominance and dependence in the system.

While structures are abstract representations of persistent patterns of thought and action, they are also real or concrete in the sense that they are products of action taken in response to actual or imagined circumstances. Scholte (1993:83) points out that a structure may be so deeply entrenched that people aren't necessarily aware of its existence or influence over their lives. He also notes that "...to say that social relations are structured is not necessarily to say that all actions, interdependencies and norms in a given historical context fit into a single underlying framework" (1993:84).

Neorealists view the structure of the international system as a distribution of material capabilities, and argue that states' interests are derived from the structure of the international system. The international structure is thus conceived as being an independent variable able to exert significant influence on state behaviour. In his seminal work, *Theory of International Politics (1979)*, Kenneth Waltz focused on the autonomy and influence of the structural component of the international system. He claimed the international political structure has two main characteristics: the first

relates to the unchanging principle according to which states are arranged, namely anarchy. The second characteristic – the distribution of capabilities – varies among states and with time. His framework is designed to explain why the international system persisted through time, i.e., he is interested in system maintenance rather than system transformation. Constructivists, on the other hand, focus on the ideational structure of the international system.

One of the main issues of contention between scholars of change in the international system is the issue regarding to what extent structures constrain and enable the actions of actors. In other words, where does the fundamental impetus for transformation lie: amongst structures, or amongst actors, or in a combination of the two? To take an example, we could ask whether uneven development in the world is a result of structure, or is it a process formation? Inevitably, one's answer to this question will determine the changes that need to occur to address inequality. This leads us to what has become known as the 'structure-agent problem'[11]. A very simplified interpretation of the issue is whether changes emanate from structures or from the actions of agents. The extreme positions are that structure is purely an outcome and has no causal significance, versus that structure imposes constraints on the range of actions available to agents.

Constructivists argue that ideational structures and agents co-constitute each other, as opposed to the realist view that the structure of the international system places constraints on the behaviour of states. Constructivism thus assumes that structures and actors mutually constitute each other. This follows from Giddens's (1978) explanation of the agent-structure problem, which he called 'structuration' or 'duality of structure' – referring to the idea that structure both constrains action and is the medium through which actors act and, in doing so, potentially transform the structure. The concept of structuration thus represents a middle ground between the two extreme positions. The chapters that follow will look closely at how the selected authors deal, in different ways, with the agent-structure problem, and how they justify their respective conceptualisations of the terms discussed above.

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[11] For a comprehensive discussion that relates the debate specifically to IR, see Friedman, G. and Starr, H. (1997) *Agency, Structure and International Politics – from ontology to empirical inquiry*. London: Routledge.

1.3.3 Normative assumptions

In light of the assertion made earlier that the study of change in IR and IR in general is an inherently normative undertaking and that scholars should be more explicit about their normative assumptions, a brief outline of the author's normative project is provided here. This study is built upon a belief that one of the main aims of social theory should be the achievement of social justice, or put differently, identifying the principles of a just world system. Social theory is a critical activity that can help to liberate human beings from oppressive systems. It is believed that the inequalities present in the current system have reached such proportions that a radical transformation is not just something to speculate about, but is in fact a matter of urgency.

This approach is in keeping with the Critical Theory approach advanced by the Frankfurt School and its heirs. One of the most famous philosophers of the second generation Critical School, Jürgen Habermas's attack on positivism is directed primarily against the claim that the validity of science is independent of any normative commitment on the part of the scientist. He believes that positivist theories inhibit emancipatory thinking and action by sidelining questions of an ethical nature. His dissatisfaction with early Critical Theory, however, led him to explore the emancipatory possibilities within language. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) Habermas in fact holds that an obligation to normative argumentation or justification is inherent to communication.

In *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1972) Habermas distinguishes between three different types of knowledge based on three cognitive interests – the technical, practical and the emancipatory[12]. He defends studies that focus on the emancipatory potential of social theory against the scientific knowledge practised by logical positivists and others by arguing that the latter is only one type of knowledge and should not be regarded as representing the standard for all forms of knowledge. Notably, as Bernstein (1986:9) points out, he does not claim that such knowledge is unimportant, only that it represents one part of knowledge.

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[12] For further detail, see Habermas (1972:162,191-192,310-314); and Bernstein (1986:8-11).

In this way he thus challenges the positivistic notion that the empirical-analytical sciences provide the model for all legitimate knowledge, and that any other form of knowledge is worthless. As an alternative, he promotes the idea of a critical social science, based on the emancipatory-cognitive interest, which also constitutes the generative capacity for change. Lessnoff (1999:275) correctly notes that Habermas's critical approach focuses on the idea of self-reflection, which in itself is emancipatory in the sense that it "...produces a knowledge capable of liberating men from 'dependence on hypostatized powers' " (see Habermas, 1972:310).

The research conducted in this study will thus be guided by normative assumptions that emphasise the necessity of fundamental change in the global state system, in order to overcome iniquitous systemic patterns of power and privilege, and its correlates, marginalisation and neglect. The underlying belief here is that one of, if not *the* main objective(s) of IR theory should be to advance the promotion of human emancipation on a global scale. 'Emancipation' as it is understood here implies a quest for autonomy as well as an exploration of security – interpreted as an absence of threats (which include poverty, disease, war, violence, political oppression, etc.). In general, thus, emancipation can be regarded as freedom from the constraints inherent in relationships of dependence. It is to be understood in the broader sense, including not only the overcoming of exploitative economic relations, but also other forms of exploitation based on race, gender, etc.

1.3.4 Comparing contending normative approaches

If we start from the assumption established in section 1.3.1 that it is not possible to create objective criteria against which to evaluate contending theories, the question arises whether drawing comparisons between competing paradigms is at all feasible. This is an important question given the method followed in this study, which compares and combines the contributions of three different authors, and ultimately aims to develop criteria by which contending approaches can be evaluated.

It is necessary at this point to briefly outline what is understood by incommensurability, and how it relates to the study at hand. This will be done by considering the work of a number of social theorists who have explored the issue of

the Cartesian Anxiety and incommensurability, notably Bernstein, Kuhn, Rorty and Feyerabend. While Kuhn was exclusively concerned with the incommensurability of theories in the natural sciences, the other scholars have attempted to generalise the types of claims and insights that Kuhn presents in a much broader context (Bernstein, 1983:97). As with so many other concepts employed in the social sciences, there is not one universally accepted definition that all parties to the dispute agree on. Wight (1996:291-292) defines incommensurability in an IR context as referring to "...the idea that there is no common measure among paradigms of inquiry, so that the inhabitants of paradigms 'live in different worlds', hold 'mutually exclusive beliefs', and/or employ 'differing language games'. Incommensurability has been many different things to different people. Bernstein (1983:79) notes, "For those who have a 'pro' attitude towards incommensurability, it has been viewed as a liberating doctrine, one that releases us from the false parochialism of regarding our familiar language games and standards as having some sort of transcendental permanence". Wight adds that it has provided a justification for theoretical pluralism, and that IR scholars have used it "...as legitimating devices for theoretical fragmentation" (1996:292). And for those who have a characteristic 'anti' attitude, "the 'thesis of incommensurability' opens the door to everything that is objectionable – subjectivism, irrationalism, nihilism" (Bernstein, 1983:79).

The incommensurability thesis is rightly understood as an attack on objectivism, which holds that there exists a neutral framework of scientific standards by which we can rationally evaluate competing theories. But the alternative to such an objectivism has been taken to be relativism, in which the incommensurability thesis has been all too easily assimilated and entangled. Bernstein's 1983 work *Beyond Relativism and Objectivism* provides an excellent discussion of how one can reject the objectivist notion that there is some permanent, ahistorical basis of knowledge and truth – a world of objective reality that exists independently of researchers, without accepting the extreme opposite – namely intellectual chaos. Bernstein tries to move beyond this Cartesian Anxiety, which he defines as "...a false dichotomy: either permanent standards of rationality (objectivism) *or* arbitrary acceptance of one set of standards or practices over against its rival (relativism)" (1983:68, emphasis in original).

To avoid falling into the trap of the Cartesian Anxiety, the incommensurability thesis is thus accepted here in the sense of implying that there are no objective, universal standards according to which rival paradigms can be compared, but it is rejected in the sense that it implies that comparisons are impossible, and that meaningful communication between contending schools of thought are precluded. Ultimately, by claiming that theories are incommensurable, the implication is not that we cannot compare them, but rather that there are multiple ways in which we can compare them (Bernstein, 1983:86). Additionally, the claim is that despite the lack of fixed standards for doing so, comparing and judging rival theories can still be a rational activity. This addresses the point which Bernstein (1983:196) makes that "[i]t is all too frequently assumed that if we cannot come up with universal, fixed criteria to evaluate the plausibility of competing interpretations, this means that we have no rational basis for distinguishing the better from the worse, the more plausible from the less plausible interpretations". *The assumption underlying this study is thus that reasoned judgments are in fact possible, in the absence of objective standards.* This, however, raises the question concerning what grounds different theories can be compared on. And more importantly, how can we - in a responsible and accountable manner - choose between different normative projects?

The proposal put forward here is that theories or approaches can be compared on the basis of their politico-normative contents. The ultimate aim then is not to answer the question which paradigm is superior to the others, in terms of so-called 'objective' criteria such as correspondence to the real world, but instead, which of the socio-economic-political agendas advocated by each of the competing paradigms is most appropriate to achieving global human emancipation.

The question whether it is possible echoes White's (1988:2) concern: "Can such [moral] appeals be more systematically elaborated and possibly accorded some sort of universally valid defense? Or do such appeals have an ineradicably vague or abstract quality...?" Similarly, Bernstein (1985:4) notes, "...the very possibility of a critical theory of society with the practical intent of furthering human emancipation..." depends on whether we can answer in the affirmative to the question whether we are still able to provide rational justification for universal normative standards".

It is also important to engage with Wight's (1996:306-307) concern regarding the proposal that paradigms can be compared through reasoned assessment on the grounds of politico-normative commitments. He has a point in saying this assumption raises a number of questions. Of course, we are left asking: what will form the basis according to which the selected authors' normative contributions will be evaluated? Whose standards of what constitutes morality / ethics will they be judged against? And with regard to 'reasoned assessment', what is regarded as reasonable in one paradigm might not be regarded as such in another. In other words, any appeal to moral principles must be seen in the light of cultural contextity. White (1988:21) holds, "The upshot of this line of argument is that what counts as rational in the moral realm will be thoroughly dependent on whatever moral norms happen to be in force in a given culture".

One reply to this could be based on Gadamer's views on this issue. "Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience " (Gadamer in Bernstein, 1983: 27). Bernstein further argues that, "If Gadamer is right in claiming that not only understanding but all knowing inevitably involves some prejudices, then it is difficult to imagine a more radical critique of Cartesianism, as well as of the Enlightenment conception of human knowledge. For in these traditions there are sharp dichotomies between reason and prejudice, or between knowledge and prejudice. To gain more knowledge we must bracket and overcome all prejudices." Instead, the contention is that "There is no knowledge without *pre*conceptions and *pre*judices. The task is not to remove all such preconceptions, but to test them critically in the course of inquiry" (Bernstein, 1983:127-128).

In a similar vein, George notes that the basis on which a decision is made must be a normative and political one. Outcomes are thus located in "...a social, historical, cultural, and linguistic realm of political debate and conflict, not some idealized realm of absolute (apolitical, asocial, ahistorical) truth, evidence, or fact. Nor does this politico-normative perspective undermine the possibility of genuine scholarly accounts of the world and its peoples. Rather, it connects the scholar directly and unequivocally to that world and imposes upon scholarship a regime of self-reflection

and critical awareness sadly absent in much of International Relations literature" (1994:24). In other words, if we do not subscribe to the idea of value-fee science, in which all prejudices are bracketed, the fact that as a researcher, we are evaluating theories from within a given context should not be seen as a problem, as long as we are aware of the fact that the knowledge generated will be prejudiced.

A second reply to this would be the contention that, given all that has been said, it is still possible to identify a universal set of norms. The work of Jürgen Habermas is important in this regard, as he tries to prove that we can legitimately speak of universal procedural criteria for assessing the validity or justness of normative claims. He shows how one can base emancipatory values not in an objective reality outside of the social context but, instead, in the preconceptions of interpersonal communications.

According to Habermas, thus, the normative foundations of a critical social theory can be found in language. His basic argument is that the possibility of a universal moral consensus and universal validity claims is inherent in the structures of human communication. The reasoning behind this is that if one assumes that there is no objective knowledge and the interests of the scientist are closely bound up with his/her underlying beliefs and what Habermas calls 'lifeworld'[13], then understanding occurs via language.

He addresses the issue of cultural and contextual deviations by explaining that "...the context–dependence of criteria by which the members of different cultures at different times judge differently the validity of expressions does not, however, mean that the ideas of truth, of normative rightness, of sincerity and of authenticity that underlie (only intuitively, to be sure) the choice of criteria are context-dependent in the same way...Whatever language system we choose, we always start intuitively from the presupposition that truth is a universal validity claim from the standpoint of cognitive adequacy..." (Habermas, 1984:55,58). In other words, as Holub notes, "Among the

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[13] Horster's definition of 'lifeworld' as "...the individual abilities, intuitive knowledge, socially accepted practices and underlying beliefs which can be interpreted as prejudices that shape our knowledge..." is accurate (1992:11). See Habermas (1987: 119-152) for a detailed exploration of this concept.

plurality of languages [or contexts] Habermas postulates a unity of reason that transcends the particularity of an individual language" (1991:61).

He subsequently develops his theory of communicative action[14], largely as a "...justification of the normative foundations of emancipatory critique" (Bernstein, 1985:17). This is Habermas's attempt to locate emancipation in the processes of argumentation and consensus. Habermas argues that anyone must, through the act of communicating, raise universal validity claims and presume that such claims can be redeemed. He justifies this on the grounds that there is a type of argumentation and rationality that is appropriate for the redemption of universal normative claims. And his essential thesis is even stronger: he asserts that the "expectation of discursive redemption of normative validity claims is already contained in the structure of intersubjectivity" (Habermas, 1984:13). In other words, any utterances - be they of a theoretical or other nature - can be judged as being rational or irrational on the grounds that they raise criticisable validity claims.

What Habermas is thus saying is that no dispute about a validity claim is beyond rational argumentation by the participants involved, and that this in fact forms part of our everyday communicative interactions (Bernstein, 1985:19). According to White (1988:38), Habermas's view is that "the validity of any social norm can be assessed by considering its consistency with an agent's intuitive sense of what ultimately gives any norm its "ought" quality: whether it incorporates interests which are "generalizable" to all who are affected by that norm" (see Habermas, 1984:89). In other words, according to Habermas, a norm is justified only when "the consequences and side-effects for the satisfaction of the interests of *every* individual, which are expected to result from a *general* conformance to [that] norm, can be accepted *without compulsion* by all" (Habermas, 1990:103, emphasis in original).

Habermas's discourse ethics, which is derived from his theory of communicative action and is based on the idea of communicative rationality, therefore provides a mechanism that can test which norms would be equally good for all. Of course, as

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[14] See Bernstein (1985: 18-25) for a concise summary of the main points of Habermas's theory of communicative action. Also see White (1988), van Niekerk (1992), Horster (1992), and Holub (1991).

Lessnoff (1999:285) points out, "In real life the conditions of Habermas's ideal speech situation are never perfectly realized, and probably cannot be, if only because of time constraints. Furthermore, the set of persons affected by any norm that might be agreed is likely to include persons not yet born". This, however, is not reason enough to dismiss his theory. Haacke (1996:260-269) proceeds to consider how one can apply the principles of discourse ethics to IR, addressing the question of how such a seemingly utopian principle can be of any practical value in IR theory. For example, many critics have questioned the viability of reaching a universal rational consensus, given the existence of a wide diversity of value preferences in the international system. Haacke (1996:285-288) provides a response to the above concern. He admits that, of course, in the practice of world politics everyone affected by a particular norm cannot be involved in debating its legitimacy. Real world constraints inevitably prevent such an ideal discourse situation. He argues, however, that we can circumvent these practical problems by relying on what he calls "procedural shortcuts," something Habermas himself refers to. Habermas writes, "...institutional measures [as the appropriate extension of communicative action] are needed to sufficiently neutralize empirical limitations and avoidable internal and external interference so that the idealized conditions always already presupposed by participants in argumentation can at least be adequately approximated. The need to institutionalize discourses, trivial though it may be, does not contradict the partly counterfactual content of the presuppositions of discourse" (1990:92).

In this way, it is, in a sense, possible to approximate ideal discourses by involving the chosen representatives of the people as participants in the argumentation. This follows the same line of thinking as the idea of representative democracy where everyone who will be affected by a particular decision is – indirectly – involved via their elected representatives. The actual form that such real-world discourses will assume, Haacke writes, will "...depend on political imagination, collective fantasy, and zeitgeist." (1996:288)

Taking onboard some of the ideas sketched above, an attempt will be made here to develop preliminary criteria which could conceivably be used to distinguish or choose between different conceptions of change, and specifically, contending normative projects. In light of the discussion in section 1.3.1, it should be clear that the criteria

which will be proposed are by no means objective. They are inevitably rooted in the author's experience and worldview, and guided by her own normative assumptions. They are, furthermore, not to be regarded as an attempt to develop comprehensive, universal criteria for evaluating theories of change. They merely constitute an initial outline of possible criteria that may be adapted by others according to their needs. Furthermore, whilst being aware of the general criteria for good theory, this study consciously sets out only to evaluate studies on the basis of their contributions to the normative project. This leads us to the other delimitations of this study.

1.4   Delimitations

This study consciously limits its scope by focusing on:

The field of study known as International Relations

- The acceptance of a particular ontology when one explores a concept as broad as global transformation necessarily limits the extent of the research project. To quote Gill (1997:7) "...the very term 'International Relations' may connote an ontology that may be inadequate to fully comprehend *global* structural change." Every theoretical inquiry has basic ontological assumptions with regard to what entities/aspects of the world are to be studied.

- While limiting one's field of analysis clearly has its drawbacks, it also has to be noted that it is not without value. As Denemark (1999:46) maintains, "Any attempt to cut into a problem as vast as global social relations would founder without some ability to narrow its scope and produce more specialized knowledge. Specialization creates stores of knowledge that are vital to the building of a foundation for more complete analysis".

Global political [15] transformation

- Although the global system is clearly not only a political system, but includes economic, social, environmental and other sectors, this study deliberately limits itself to analysing only political change.

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[15] I am using the concept 'political' in the Coxian inclusive sense to mean "any contest of power" (Cox, 1997:xvi).

- Disaggregating the international system and focusing only on the political is done for the sake of simplification and clarity, for methodological convenience. The adoption of such an approach should not, however, by any means be understood to imply that the various sectors constituting the international system are autonomous, and can function independently of the others.

A selection of three authors

- As noted earlier, the knowledge of global political transformation generated here will be limited and prejudiced as – due to resource constraints – only part of the vast literature on the subject can be examined. Firstly, almost all of the literature used is of Western – particularly American and British – origin. There are a number of reasons why this is so – obviously there is the issue of language, but perhaps more significantly is the issue of availability of work by non-Anglo-American scholars and the domination of the field by the latter and their gatekeepers. Secondly, due to time constraints, a decision was made to focus mainly on the contributions of three authors. In summary, Alexander Wendt, John Gerard Ruggie and Robert W. Cox were chosen for the following reasons:

(1) change forms an important focal point of their work and they share an interest in developing an approach which focuses on the possibility of a global political transformation;

(2) they stand out in terms of the depth of their analyses and their theoretical sophistication;

(3) all three have chosen to incorporate rather than reject existing realist assumptions, whilst recognising that neorealism has a number of shortcomings, particularly with regard to the way in which it disregards the role of ideas and the normative dimension of international relations;

(4) all three address the materialism-idealism debate in innovative and instructive ways, and crucially, relate it to their conceptions of change. Significantly, they all emphasise the importance of focusing both on material and ideational factors;

(5) their work raises important normative questions.

1.5   Outline of chapters

In order to compare and utilise their respective contributions to the stated research aims, it is essential to gain a thorough understanding of the work of our three selected authors, particularly as it relates to global transformation. To this end, **chapters two, three,** and **four,** will consist of an in-depth review of the work of Alexander Wendt, John Gerard Ruggie and Robert W. Cox, respectively. Particular emphasis will be placed on their respective approaches to the idealism-materialism debate, and the (explicit and implicit) normative implications of their conceptualisations of change.

Chapter five addresses the second research focus, and aims to shed light on the materialism-idealism debate and its implications for change by developing an integrated answer to the question concerning the role of ideas, and the interplay between ideas and material factors in analyses of global political transformation. This will be done by delineating the general debate between idealists and materialists, and considering where our three authors are placed in this debate. It will be asserted that, despite their different points of departure, Wendt, Ruggie and Cox all emphasise the importance of focusing both on material and ideational factors. Ultimately, therefore, with the aim of making a constructive contribution to the analysis of change in IR, a middle ground approach to the materialism-idealism debate is advocated. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to outlining this middle ground position, and considering the advantages and challenges associated with it. Finally, the chapter also explores the value of theoretical 'bridge-building', in other words, engaging in dialogue across theoretical divides as a way of contributing to the analysis of change and the development of IR theory in general.

It has been established above that normative issues have been equally absent in most studies of change. The normative implications of change therefore have to be exposed, and questions relating to what criteria might be used to choose between contending normative approaches to change dealt with. **Chapter six** addresses these issues. Again, the views of our three authors on this particular issue and the conclusions drawn in preceding chapters are utilised to assist in developing the proposed criteria. Furthermore, an important related normative question is also addressed, namely the desirability of the continued existence of the state system. In

other words, the question of whether the state system inhibits or is able to facilitate progressive global political transformation is explored. The conclusion is that, based on the views of Ruggie, Wendt and Cox, normative change need not imply the demise of the state system.

Finally, **chapter seven** provides a summary of and conclusion to the study, and suggests areas for future research.

CHAPTER 2

Alexander Wendt : In Search of a Middle Ground

2.1   Introduction

Alexander Wendt is part of a rare breed of IR scholars – a self-proclaimed constructivist whose work can nevertheless be found in IR theory course outlines alongside mainstream writers like Waltz, Keohane and Nye. His work is important for this study because he can be regarded as a transformative writer who successfully addresses neorealism's shortcomings with regard to explaining change in the international system, and especially the role of ideas in bringing about such transformation.

Although some of Wendt's core theoretical innovations were developed in earlier articles[1], the main focus of this chapter will be his 1999 study, *Social Theory of International Politics* (henceforth referred to as '*STIP*'). In this book, Wendt draws together and refines his ideas on the international system in a well-argued thesis, the impact of which some have compared with the publication of Kenneth Waltz's seminal study in 1979[2].

STIP is particularly interesting because it is an exceptionally well written appeal for moderation, for eclecticism, for searching for the best way to analyse the international system, even if that means using approaches from both outside one's theoretical grounding, as well as from outside the field of IR. Wendt sets his sights on achieving a particular end – which to him is explaining international politics – whilst calling for

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[1] Notably his groundbreaking "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory" (1987) and "Anarchy is what states make of it" (1992).

[2] Waltz, K. (1979) *Theory of International Politics*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

less rigidity when it comes to choosing the means to achieve this objective. Throughout, Wendt subjects generally accepted concepts and assumptions that are usually left unquestioned to scrutiny of a scientific vigour. He engages the reader and consistently pre-empts potential questions or arguments, each time defending his position by means of persuasive argumentation.

Like many critics of neorealism, Wendt uses Waltz's *Theory of Politics* (1979) as his foil. Waltz holds that the material structure, reflected in the distribution of capabilities, is the main determinant in international politics, and that the international system is inherently an anarchical one characterised by enmity and power politics. Against this, Wendt argues that Waltz's thinking is flawed because it ignores the role that intersubjectively shared ideas play in constructing the identities and ideas of international actors.

Following in the constructivist tradition, Wendt's study can thus be seen largely as an extended critique aimed at showing that neorealism's problematic conclusions about international politics stem from its underlying materialist and individualist ontology. He is thus following R.B.J. Walker's advice that "differences among approaches to world politics must be addressed at the level of basic ontological assumptions" (1989, quoted in Sterling-Folker, 2002:74). One of the cornerstones of his work is Wendt's belief that mainstream IR theory is overly concerned with empirical issues, at the expense of ontological ones. He is acutely aware of the dangers of becoming caught up in epistemological debates, where the conclusion is often that any further debate is pointless due to the incommensurability of the opposing approaches (a position often taken towards the so-called 'Third Debate' in IR, between rationalism and reflectivism). He therefore calls for an end to the epistemological wars and a refocusing on more fundamental assumptions about the international system, such as the question regarding what the international system is made of. His ultimate aim is to show that, depending on the answer to this question, the resultant theory will differ significantly. In other words, he wants to find alternatives to the neorealist worldview, which is based on a materialist and individualist ontology. Instead, he calls for a reconceptualisation of the international system in idealist and holist terms.

What makes Wendt's critique of mainstream IR theory, and neorealism in particular, so innovative, is that he takes considerable care not to throw the baby out with the bath water. Whilst disagreeing with many neorealist and neoliberalist assumptions, he maintains that some of their tenets can be incorporated into alternative explanations of the international system, in his case a constructivist framework.

2.2   The argument for scientific realism as a via media

Surprisingly for a scholar who subscribes to a constructivist approach, a key theme in Wendt's work is to show that ideas in international politics can be studied using a scientific approach[3]. He tries to find a middle ground to show that admitting the importance of ideas does not necessarily have to go hand in hand with the rejection of a scientific epistemology. In other words, Wendt has tried to counter the assumption that constructivists automatically subscribe to a post-positivist epistemology. In doing so he has attempted to transcend the divisions between social and IR theory in order to integrate them into a theory that can deal more effectively with the phenomenon of transformation. For someone who claims, "epistemological issues are relatively uninteresting. The debate should be about what the international world is made of – ontology – not how we can know it" (1999:90), Wendt dedicates a considerable amount of time and space to defending his unique epistemological approach.

In order to prove that he is a "positivist"[4] Wendt has to argue that the social world can be studied in the same scientific manner as the natural world, and that scientific realism can provide the via media. Scientific realism rejects the empiricist assumption that unobservable entities - whether natural or social - cannot be said to exist. Instead, its underlying assumption is that one can infer the existence of these entities on the grounds of observable effects caused by them. By rejecting the view that reality is in any way dependent on what we know or believe, Wendt is thus clearly positioning himself away from the more radical postmodern and post-

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[3] For more information on scientific realism see Wendt (1999:47-91), Wight (2002:43), Dessler (1991 & 1999), Ringmar (1997:273-274) and Smith (2000a:580-581).

[4] See Wendt (1999:39) "I am a positivist".

structuralist strands of constructivism. Instead, he believes, "What is needed is a theory of reference that takes account of the contribution of mind and language yet is anchored to reality" (1999:57). In other words, even though mind and language help determine meaning and knowledge, meaning and knowledge are also regulated by a mind-independent, extra-linguistic world. Wendt, however, contradicts this position towards the end of his book, admitting that "human beings do not have direct unmediated access to the world. All observation is theory laden" (1999:370).

Wendt's approach raises the question whether positivism is not inherently based on an empiricist epistemology. One could argue that when Wendt claims he is a positivist, this contradicts his scientific realist approach. In other words, one could justifiably claim that, by rejecting the empiricist view that unobservable entities cannot be said to exist, Wendt's interpretation of positivism is questionable. Brglez (2001) similarly argues that Wendt's constructivism and scientific realism cannot form a bridge with positivism as the latter is generally understood. Guzzini and Leander go as far as saying, "Wendt can make a claim for positivism only because he has voided the concept to such an extent that it becomes synonymous with a commitment to scientific work" (2001:322). They argue that, in fact, by retaining only one element of positivism - unity of science - Wendt's version of positivism appears, under scrutiny, to be closer to post-positivism. The root of such confusion over the concept 'positivism' lies in the loose way in which it is used in IR, often with very diverse meanings. Most often it has an epistemological meaning (in other words equated with empiricism or even behaviouralism), at other times it has a methodological connotation.

Aware of the fact that constitutive theorising, which is favoured by constructivists, is inherently static[5], Wendt incorporates causal theorising in the hope that this will make his theory more dynamic, by addressing the 'why' question. He thus regards causality as having an important role in explaining the process of change, or the mechanisms of

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[5] "Constitutive analysis is inherently static. It tells us what structures are made of and how they can have certain effects, but not about the processes by which they move through time, in short, about history. This is clearest in the case of structural change, which is caused by actions that undermine existing structures and generate new ones" (Wendt, 1999:185-186).

change. So again, true to form, Wendt is advocating a dual mode of theorising[6]. In seeking justification for his middle ground approach, Wendt contends that part of the rift between positivists and post-positivists can be traced to a misunderstanding of the type of theorising the scholars advocating each approach are involved in. According to Wendt, "Positivists think natural scientists do not do constitutive theory and so privilege causal theory; post-positivists think social scientists should not do causal theory and so privilege constitutive theory".[7]

Similarly, in terms of preferred methodology, Wendt notes, "answering constitutive questions will require interpretive methods. This methodological difference from natural science is then thought to require an epistemological divorce from positivism. Positivists assume the only legitimate question that social scientists can ask is the causal question of "why?", while interpretivists think that the unique role of self-understanding in social life makes the epistemology and proper practice of social science fundamentally different from that of natural science" (1999:85).

He maintains that this leads to an unnecessary divide, as "in fact all scientists do both kinds of theory; causal and constitutive theories simply ask different questions" and "[t]hese questions transcend the natural-social science divide" (1999:77-78). While there are important methodological differences, they do not extend to the level of epistemology, and merely reflect different questions asked. Wendt claims that the scientific realist approach provides a solution to this dilemma, as it "encourage[s] a pragmatic approach, with the methodological criterion being whatever helps us understand how the world works. Methods appropriate to answer one question may differ from those for another" (1999:82-83).

A number of IR scholars, notably Smith (2000) have taken issue with Wendt's attempt to develop a social scientific account of international politics. As a post-positivist, Smith maintains that such an approach is inappropriate, as, by "...fundamentally misconceiv[ing] the nature of the social world, ... [it] limits the range of possibilities for a social theory of international relations based on it." He

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[6] See Guzzini and Leander (2001:323-324) for a critique of Wendt's attempt at synthesis.

[7] See Wendt (1999:79-88) for a discussion of causal and constitutive theorising.

further argues that because social phenomena are intersubjective, they cannot stand as objects in relation to human subjects (2000:152-153).

Related to this is Smith's concern (2000:156-159) about Wendt's notion of causal and constitutive theories, specifically his claim that, contrary to the beliefs held by positivists and post-positivists, natural and social scientists are engaged in both causal and constitutive theorising. Smith contends that Wendt's understanding of constitutive theorising conflicts with how the term is generally used in the social sciences, where it is usually contrasted with explanatory or causal theory. He is concerned about the fact that "Wendt seems to be avoiding the issue of how relevant is causal analysis to the social world by proposing an additional form of theory that turns out to be more an adjunct than an alternative to causal theorizing" (2000:157). Smith points out that Wendt's claim that "social science must be anchored to the world via the mechanisms described by the causal theory" (1999:58) cannot be reconciled with his idealist approach to studying the world. Smith's argument is thus ultimately that an idealist account is not suited to one that stresses the causal nature of the social world.

Wendt undoubtedly underplays what are serious ontological and epistemological disparities between positivism and interpretivism, even going as far as maintaining that "there is no fundamental epistemological difference between Explanation and Understanding" (1999:85). A strong argument can be made for the view that the differences between the two approaches go deeper than the level of methodology. Although a more detailed discussion of interpretivism and positivism will be undertaken in the next chapter, it might be useful to highlight the main issues that could shed more light on Wendt's contention that the differences between the two approaches are exaggerated. As Dessler (1999:128) notes, what distinguishes positivism from alternative approaches is its inherently explanatory logic, the main requirement of which is that "an explanation establish the phenomenon it explains as something that was to be expected in the circumstances where it occurred". In other words, positivists do not merely use explanation as a preferred method, but in fact the logic underlying the entire approach is an explanatory one.

In terms of the ontology of international relations, positivists regard international relations - which forms part of the social world - as something which one can

observe and analyse, like one can the natural world, from an external vantage point. In contrast, in an interpretivist approach, the actors involved in international relations, and their experiencing of events, cannot be separated from an understanding of international relations. In short, whilst for positivists, the social world is an independent phenomenon, for interpretivists, it is a social construction (Hollis and Smith, 1990:1-6). Hence, the social world is made of different 'stuff' from the natural world, "stuff" which behaves differently to natural phenomena. It follows that it must be studied in a manner more consistent with its unique nature.

Wendt seems to realise the limits of using scientific methods to study social phenomena, turning periodically to alternative methods. Drulak (2001:366-368) points out that, while scientific realism is unable to deal with reflexivity, Wendt relies implicitly on reflexivity in his account of change, leading to a contradiction in his theorising. He argues that Wendt appears to rely on scientific realism, until its naturalist explanations are exhausted, which is when he turns to the otherwise neglected reflexive approach. Wendt's proposal that social science inquiry should be driven by questions, not methods, is not without value. After all, one could argue that if explaining a particular phenomenon requires causal thinking, then so be it.

2.3 Finding a middle ground between individualism and holism

While Wendt adopts a positivist approach to epistemology, as was discussed in the previous section, he subscribes to a holist approach, characteristic of post-positivism, when it comes to ontology[8].

Perhaps it would be useful to briefly summarise the differences between holism and individualism, of which the agent-structure debate is one of the main points of contention. The debate largely concerns disagreement over the extent to which structures constrain agents, and also the influence that agents have on structure. While individualists hold that structure can be reduced to the properties and interactions of agents, the holist approach claims that structures can have both causal and constitutive

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[8] "Epistemologically I have sided with positivists...on ontology...I will side in subsequent chapters with post-positivists" (Wendt, 1999:90).

construction effects on agents. Wendt rejects neorealism and neoliberalism on the grounds that they are based on individualism[9], which assumes that an actor or agent's identities and interests are independent of the social structure. He notes that an individualist ontology fails to recognise that agents might be constituted by social structures, and that the nature of states might consequently be bound up conceptually with the structure of the states system. Furthermore, according to Wendt, focusing on either structure or agents limits one's analysis. In other words, we should not prioritise one above the other. Wendt devotes an entire chapter to this issue[10], in which he develops a complex argument to show how the relationship between agents and structure can at once be independent and dependent, causal and constitutive. Even though he expresses his preference for holism above individualism, in the end he therefore advocates a dual ontology along the lines of Giddens's structuration theory, which views structures and agents as being mutually constitutive. In other words, "Social structures are the result of the intended and unintended consequences of human action, just as those actions presuppose or are mediated by an irreducible structural context" (Wendt, 1987:360). Wendt is thus arguing that not only is the structure of the state system dependable on but not reducible to the properties and interactions between state actors, but also that the properties of states are dependent on the structure of the state system.

Such a dualistic approach is, however, bound to create confusion. Despite his commitment to a synthesis between holism and individualism, it is difficult for the reader to reconcile seemingly contradictory claims. If one considers the following quotes, it seems that, at times, Wendt clearly prioritises the role of agents over that of structure:

"it is impossible for structures to have effects apart from the attributes and interactions of agents" (1999:12).

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[9] In his 1987 article, Wendt argues that in IR, there is confusion regarding the relationship between levels of analysis and the agent-structure debate. Subsequently, Waltz's theory is classified as structuralist or systemic (on the basis of his level of analysis) even though his underlying logic is an individualist one.

[10] See Wendt (1999) Chapter 4: "Structure, Agency and Culture" (pp.139-190).

"structure exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices" (1999:185, emphasis in original).

However, at other times, the dependence that Wendt attributes to certain properties of states on cultural structures differentiates his theory from more individualist approaches. For example,

"...the effects of social structures cannot be reduced to independently existing agents and their interactions..." (1999:26).

Wendt also admits that he has changed his mind regarding the relationship between agents and structures: "In the past I have suggested that this relation should be seen as one of "mutual constitution" (Wendt, 1987). While still sympathetic to this notion, my view today is less symmetric, and I also now prefer to explicate it in terms of the concept of "supervenience"[11] (1996:48-49). By trying to find a middle ground, Wendt has ended up painting a rather hazy picture of his view of the agent-structure debate, and has, ironically, opened himself up for criticism from all sides.

Another part of Wendt's approach to the individualist-holist debate is the claim that mainstream IR has failed to recognise the potential plural nature of the structure of the international system. One of the cornerstones of Waltz's theory is the emphasis on IR as a field that warrants a structural or systemic theory – in other words, one which does its explaining by reference to structural characteristics. He dismisses unit-level or, in his terms "reductionist" theories, which offer explanations on the basis of unit-level attributes, claiming they have no value in IR. Furthermore, he also argues that theories of interaction between units belong at the unit level, and similarly have no place in a structural theory of IR. Wendt takes issue with this assumption, agreeing with Keohane and Nye (1989) and Buzan, Little and Jones (1993) that the interaction or process level should be regarded as a distinct level. Wendt argues that process is ultimately the resolution of the agent-structure debate, and it is also where we find the potential for structural change (1999:145-147).

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[11] Supervenience is a concept used in analytical philosophy to describe a non-reductive relationship of ontological dependency, in which properties at one level are fixed or constituted by those at another, but are not reducible to them.

He differs, however, from Buzan, Little and Jones, who do not regard interaction as a structural feature, but as a process falling somewhere between the unit and the structural level. Instead, Wendt claims that "this interaction level has, and should therefore be recognized as having, "structure" (1999:147). He thus proposes distinguishing between two levels of structure: micro (referring to structures of interaction between states) and macro (referring to Waltz's conception of structure). Wendt again calls on the concept of supervenience to elucidate the relationship between macro- and micro-structures. So unlike Waltz, Buzan, Jones and Little, whose assumptions imply that structure exists or has effects apart from process and that process is not itself structured, Wendt maintains that there are two levels of analysis (micro and macro), both of which are structured and instantiated by process. It follows that "There are no structures without agents and no agents (except in a biological sense) without structures. Social processes are always structured, and social structures are always in process" (1999:186).

The same argument used to appeal for the concurrent employment of causal and constitutive theorising is again utilised to stress the value of theorising both at the level of micro and macro structures. As before, Wendt advocates a pragmatic approach to explanation that relates the type of mechanisms being sought to the question being asked. He asserts that "those interested in understanding the structure of a system would do well to adopt a pluralistic, multi-method strategy" (1999:155).

Having discussed Wendt's proposed answer to the agent-structure debate, namely that the structure of the international system can be divided into two distinct levels, we need to turn to ontological issues, which Wendt's study deliberately prioritises, namely what that structure is made of. This leads us to Wendt's take on the materialist-idealist debate.

2.4 Reconceptualising the structure of the international system

According to Wendt the structure of any social system consists of three integral parts: material conditions, interests, and ideas. He chooses to separate them, for analytical purposes only, and to focus on the ideational structure. In particular, he takes issue with neorealism's exclusively materialist view of structure – in other words regarding

structure as the distribution of material capabilities under anarchy. Instead, he contends, "...if we want to say a small number of big and important things about world politics we would do better to focus first on states' ideas and the interests they constitute, and only then worry about who has how many guns" (1999:256). The idealist-materialist debate, which concerns the relative importance of material forces and ideas in this social structure, is thus central to Wendt's theory.

The reason why this issue is so important to Wendt's project and to this study is that the extent to which the material base is constituted by ideas is a question which "bears on the transformative potentials of the international system" (Wendt, 1999:95). Whether one has a predominantly material or a social conception of the structure of the international system will impact on how one conceptualises change of or in the system. From a neorealist point of view, change in the system's structure can only occur when there is a change in the distribution of (material) capabilities. This leads Wendt to draw the conclusion that neorealism is in fact unable to explain structural change. The type of structural change Wendt is referring to is of a social, rather than a material nature. He cites the end of the Cold War as an example of such change. Neorealists are unable to provide explanations for this type of change, arguing that it is not an instance of fundamental structural transformation because the underlying structure of anarchy has not been changed.

Wendt declares that what is needed is a reconceptualisation of what international structure is made of, and advocates beginning one's theorising about international politics with the distribution of ideas, and especially culture, in the system and then bringing in material forces, rather than the other way around. Ultimately, Wendt reasons that, by reconceptualising the structure of the system in idealist terms, it becomes possible to ask constitutive questions that might lead to progress in the system's evolution (1999:376).

Given the centrality of the concept 'idealism' in Wendt's work, and the wide and often disparate use of the term in the social sciences, it is important to clarify what Wendt means when he employs the concept. He emphasises that one must not confuse this type of idealism (as an ontological departure point or a type of social theory) with the IR theory of Idealism, which is often associated with utopianism and

even naivety. Wendt's particular brand of idealism, which some authors have chosen to call "idea-ism",[12] does not make assumptions about the inherent good nature of human beings. Neither is it "a normative theory of how the world ought to be, but a scientific view of how it is" (1999:24). This also has important implications for the prospects of change. Wendt's idealism does not assume that social change is easy. In fact, he claims that change is sometimes "*more* difficult in social structures than material ones" (1999:24). However, "to the extent that interests are constituted by beliefs we can have more hope of changing them than we could if they simply reflected human nature" (1999:134).

By defending this particular view of idealism, Wendt might be accused of trying to practise value-free social science. Barkin (2003:332) claims that Wendt, in his quest for a scientific approach, tries to distance himself from a normative approach to IR by denying the fact that the term idealism has a normative association. I will return to this issue when I discuss the normative implications of Wendt's work towards the end of the chapter.

Wendt also stresses that his use of the term idealism is not based on a subjectivist understanding of social theory, in other words the view that shared ideas have no objective reality. The comprehensive outline of his scientific realist approach is conducted mainly to show exactly the opposite – namely how it is possible for ideas to be studied scientifically. He maintains that social structures are no less real than material ones, and adds, "Idealist social theory is not about denying the existence of the real world. The point is that the real world consists of a lot more than material forces *as such*" (1999:136, emphasis in original).

As was briefly outlined in Chapter One, the differences between materialist and idealist approaches are important for understanding change. Materialists believe that material forces, including human nature, natural resources, geography, forces of production and destruction, have the most significant effects on the social world. In other words, with specific reference to IR, in attempting to explain or understand the

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[12] Skoczylas (2000:1) talks about Wendt's "idea-ist" definition of structure. Wendt (1996:48) also implies that the terms "structural idealism" and "idea-ism" can be used interchangeably.

international system and change in or of that system, the focus is on material factors. A materialist approach does not necessarily imply that ideas play no role, but rather that their effects are not as important as that of material factors, and that their impact is limited to acting as intervening (causal) variables. Idealists, on the other hand, believe that ideas, rather than material forces, are the most important aspect of social structure. Furthermore, in contrast to the materialist causal treatment of ideas, idealists emphasise their constitutive, instead of just causal effects.

It is also important to note that the distinction between what can be regarded as material and what as ideational factors is not as clear as perhaps one would assume. This is an issue which, when neglected, may lead to significant confusion and clearly has implications for one's understanding of and reaction to the materialist-idealist debate. Wendt emphasises the importance of drawing a clear separation between the respective effects of material forces and ideas. He is especially concerned with the frequent juxtaposition of power and interest (which are treated as material factors in mainstream IR) to ideas as opposing causes. Instead, Wendt argues, while power and interest are a distinct and important set of causes, they are in fact constituted by ideas and therefore such a crude separation not only results in confusion, but also has serious implications for theorising. If it is assumed that power and interest are material factors, it follows that the only way to challenge theories which focus on them, like neorealism, is to attempt to prove that, above and beyond these material forces, ideational factors like norms are *also* important explanatory factors. Wendt notes the problem with this approach, namely if the explanatory problem is framed as "power and interest versus institutions, versus norms, versus ideas" the implication is "that power and interest are not themselves constituted by ideas" (1999:114). In contrast, Wendt claims that interests *are* largely constituted by ideas, although material forces do play a role as well. Unlike the causal approach to the effect of ideas, which concedes power and interest to materialists but tries to show that they matter less than materialists think, the constitutive approach implies no such claim. Interests are thus one of the main points of contention in the materialist-idealist debate, with materialists maintaining that material factors determine interests, while idealists claim that ideas do.

Diverging from the generally accepted understanding of materialism, Wendt argues that what makes a theory materialist is not the fact that it explains the world on the basis of material forces but that it does so on account of "brute" material forces, the latter being "things which exist and have certain causal powers independent of ideas" (1999:94). Wendt thus reframes the materialist-idealist debate by narrowing the definition of materialism to a "stricter, rump definition focusing on materiality per se" (1999:136). The debate thus becomes one about the relative contribution of brute material forces to power and interest explanations.

Whilst advocating an idealist view of structure, Wendt cannot be accused of disregarding the role of material factors. In fact, he goes to considerable lengths to distance himself from the more radical constructivist position that it is 'ideas all the way down', and addresses materialist arguments head on. He rejects the view that brute material forces have no independent effects on international relations, and emphasises the fact that he is not suggesting "that ideas matter apart from material conditions" (1999:140). His justification is based on his underlying belief in scientific realism, which holds that "ideas are based on and are regulated by an independently existing reality" (1999:110).

What he calls his 'rump materialism' argument claims that, given the constitutive effects of ideas on material forces, "material forces are not constituted solely by social meanings, and social meanings are not immune to material effects" (1999:111-112). Wendt notes the constraining and enabling effects that material forces like natural resources and the distribution of material capabilities can have, especially in terms of defining the physical limits of possibility and helping to define the costs and benefits of alternative action. He adds that material forces interact with interests and culture "to dispose social action and systems in certain directions and not others". By using the term "interaction" he is emphasising the independence of material forces, and consequently their ability to have a causal effect on society. But Wendt leaves a back door open when he claims, "Sometimes ideas will override material conditions altogether" (2000:166).

To a certain extent, Wendt thus circumvents criticism regarding constructivism's neglect of material factors by turning the argument on its head, and reclaiming certain

'material factors' like power and interests as ideational factors. "The claim is *not* that ideas are more important than power and interest, or that they are autonomous from power and interest. Power and interest are just as important in determining as before. The claim is rather that power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up. Power and interest explanations *presuppose* ideas, and to that extent are not rivals to ideational explanations at all" (1999:135). Instead of playing material and ideational factors off against one another in terms of their importance as causal factors in explaining the international system, Wendt employs a constitutive argument that transcends this debate.

Criticism of Wendt's attempts to establish a middle ground position between positivism and post-positivism, and individualism and holism, apply here as well. Wendt has ended up portraying a highly complex and at times contradictory relationship between material forces and ideas. Smith (2000) illustrates how Wendt adopts a rather imprecise notion of the relationship between the material and the ideational worlds by quoting some apparently contradictory references to the relationship between idealist and material forces in *STIP*:

"...at some level material forces are constituted independently of society, and affect society in a causal way. Material forces are not constituted solely by social meaning" (Wendt, 1999:111).

"...the effects of anarchy and material structure depend on what states want" (Wendt, 1999:96)

"it is only because of their interaction with ideas that material forces have the effects they do" (Wendt, 1999:112).

He justifiably concludes that this results in "a confusing and ambiguous picture of the relationship between the material and the ideational, sometimes the material is an independent causal variable, at other times it is a dependent variable whose power depends on the ideational, at still other times it is an intervening variable" (Smith, 2000:154). Wendt's reply is that treating material conditions as both independent and dependent variables is not a problem in itself, as how we treat them depends on the

question we are trying to answer (2000:166). Wendt is again falling back on the same argument he employed in the constitutive/causal theorising debate: be pragmatic and use material forces in whatever form you need them for your research. Nevertheless, regardless of how one interprets Wendt's distinction between idealist and materialist factors, in the end he portrays them as being different things when he admits that "we can only properly theorize this relationship [between ideas and material forces] if we recognize that at some level they are constituted as different kinds of independent "stuff" (1999:112). This contradicts the naturalism or unit-of-science thesis, which is a cornerstone of his scientific realist approach.

Contradicting what he initially sets out to do, Wendt himself admits that a synthesis between an idealist and a materialist approach is a difficult one to sustain: "To some extent each can accommodate the insights of the other, but only in its own terms...A truly synthetic position is hard to sustain, however, because materialists will always object to arguments in which the ideational superstructure bears no determinate relation to the material base, and idealists will always object to arguments in which it does" (1999:25-26). In the end, Wendt's position in the idealism-materialism debate remains unclear, and open to different interpretations, depending on one's point of departure. As Smith (2000:156) notes, "For the more radical constructivist, Wendt seems to give final say to the material; yet, for the naturalist, his approach seems to resemble philosophical idealism".

2.5   Disputing realism's monopoly on state-centrism

An issue which has raised eyebrows, especially amongst fellow constructivists, is Wendt's state-centric approach. In his detailed discussion of the states systemic project in Chapter 1 of *STIP*, Wendt advances a number of reasons for his choice of approach. He emphasises that state-centrism does not deny that non-state actors have important effects on the international system. In fact, he admits that it may even be the case that "non-state actors are becoming more important than states as initiators of change, but system change ultimately happens through states" (1999:9). Furthermore, Wendt holds that just because IR scholars have in the past neglected non-state units, this is not an adequate reason for not also studying the state system. The underlying assumption is that all theories inherently have to take something as given and in doing

so bracket issues that may be problematised by others. In anticipation of criticism for his unapologetically state-centric approach, he uses a metaphor to justify it: "States are still at the centre of the international system, and as such it makes no more sense to criticize a theory of international politics as "state centric" than it does to criticize a theory of forests for being "tree-centric" (1999:9).

He argues that while neorealism, which has gained a monopoly over state-centric theorising, might not be able to explain structural change, this does not mean there is not potential for the development of alternative state-centric theories that can. Related to this, Wendt emphasises that advocating non-state-centric theorising on the grounds that the state is inevitably tied to centralised authority is a false assumption. He notes that while "in the Westphalian system state agents and authority structures did coincide spatially...the two concepts need not correspond in this way...Political authority could in principle be international *and* decentralized", and most importantly, that it is possible to conceive of such change within the confines of state-centric theorising" (1996:59). In other words, he suggests that we may see the development of a different type of state system – one based, for example, on internationalised states. Wendt thus tries to counter the widely held view that state-centric IR theory cannot explain structural change by arguing that "the problem lies not with statism but with two other commitments that inform contemporary understandings of structural theory: realism and rationalism"(1996:62).

Wendt also pre-empts criticism of his systemic or structural approach, which he describes as emphasising "the causal powers of the structure of the international system in explaining state behaviour (as distinguished from reductionist theories that emphasise unit-level factors like domestic politics)" (1999:11). He continues by saying that the possibility of systems theory assumes that domestic or unit and systemic levels of analysis can be separated. While some might argue that this cannot be assumed, as the distinction between state and system is being eroded as a result of increasing interdependence, or that the boundary between state and system is a social construction that needs to be problematised rather than taken as a given, Wendt insists that a separation is possible. His counterargument is grounded in the organisation of authority. He argues that, in the contemporary international system political authority is organised formally in a bifurcated fashion: vertically between states (hierarchy) and

horizontally between (anarchy). He concludes that, as long as global political space is organised in this way, states will behave differently toward each other than they do in their own societies (1999:13).

Leading on from Wendt's state-centric approach is his treatment of states as unitary actors. In justifying the proposition that states are self-organising actors with intrinsic identities and interests, Wendt implicitly defends the view that states are ontologically prior to the states system. Wendt's treatment of the state as a unitary actor results from his 'it's not ideas all the way down' approach. He thus holds that it is necessary to treat states as, at some level, given for purposes of systemic IR theory (1999:193-198;245). Wendt defends his position by saying he is not advocating that states should never be problematised all the way down. In fact, he admits, "Because of the low density of international society I do not claim that states are constructed primarily by international structures. Much of the construction is at the domestic level ... and a complete theory of state identity needs to have a large domestic component" (Wendt, 1999:21).

Instead, he contends that systemic theorists cannot be involved in this type of theorising because systems of states presuppose states and so if we want to analyse the structure of those systems we cannot de-centre their elements all the way down. In other words, if we are interested in developing a theory of the state system rather than a theory of the state, we have to take the existence of states as a given. Wendt admits, "I limit my focus to factors at the systemic level, even though domestic factors may matter as well" (Wendt, 1996:54). So he is not saying explorations of the internal processes that construct the state are not worthwhile pursuing, only that he has not opted to do so, claiming, "No one...can problematize everything at once. It all depends on the question one is asking" (2000:175).

Shaw (2000:2) criticises Wendt for assuming states to be unitary actors, and laments the exclusion of Michael Mann's 1993 authoritative critique of the simple unitary assumption. Similarly, Doty (2000:138-139) identifies the biggest contradiction of *STIP* as Wendt's goal of developing a social constructivist theory of the international system and his "continued reification of the state". She claims that Wendt "seems to suggest that one should go with social construction when it is convenient and reify

when it is not" (Doty, 2000:138). These critics argue that by treating the states as a unitary actor, Wendt ignores an important factor which influences state behaviour, namely domestic politics. As noted above, however, Wendt has gone to considerable trouble to defend, I would argue quite effectively, his decision to bracket off domestic processes in order to get on with systemic theorising. Nevertheless, some of the criticism remains valid, for example Landolt's (2004:581) concern that, treated in a constructivist manner, states are not seen as having material or other domestic constraints which could impact on their behaviour, and hence "states appear equally capable of normative shifts and identity reconstruction". A unitary treatment of states contradicts the constructivist understanding of the state. And given Wendt's contention that the social structure cannot change without agents, surely more attention needs to be paid to what the factors are which cause agents to act.

Not all responses to Wendt's approach of treating the state as a unitary actor have been negative. Copeland praises Wendt for helping "to improve all systemic theorising...by providing the most rigorous philosophical justification yet produced for treating the state as an actor". He claims Wendt successfully shows that, without assuming that states are actors which exist prior to interaction, social processes at the international level would have nothing to act upon. He adds, "The extreme constructivist position - that it is ideas all the way down - leaves the theorist with all structure and no agents...In such a situation, there is no possibility for transformation of the structure, through the actions of agents. The system would continually reproduce itself, and change across time resulting from discursive practices would be impossible..." (2000:197-198).

2.6   Implications for change

This leads us to one of the most significant aspects of Wendt's approach to international relations, namely the implications it has for explaining global political transformation. As noted in the introduction, Wendt's study is largely a critical response to neorealism's inability to explain structural change. As stated earlier, Wendt's understanding of structural change is social or cultural change, which involves collective identity formation. In his perspective, the role that actors or agents have in bringing about change is thus emphasised, with structural change occurring

when actors redefine who they are and what they want. In other words, changing practices of interaction will lead to changes in intersubjective understandings.

In trying to explain structural change, Wendt thus focuses on one particular aspect of the ideational structure, namely socially shared knowledge or *"culture"*, which can be understood to refer to knowledge that is both common and connected between individuals. It is therefore similar to Ruggie's 'social facts', the constructivist notion of 'intersubjective understandings', and the rationalist term 'common knowledge', even though the latter focuses on the causal effects of this type of knowledge, while the others emphasise its constitutive effects. It is here that Wendt believes the key to unlocking the phenomenon of change lies. He contends that culture has both subjective and intersubjective characteristics, and can therefore be neither a unit-level nor a macro-level structure. The solution is to apply the distinction between micro- and macro-levels of structure and classify culture as an interaction-, or micro-level phenomenon (1999:160). In other words, the beliefs that states share about international law, diplomacy and sovereignty are all interaction-level phenomena.

According to Wendt, what constructivism adds to the individualist-holist and agent-structure debate is a focus on both the causal and constitutive effects of culture, while mainstream IR describes the agent-structure debate only in causal terms. The argument that culture can also have constitutive effects thus "challenges the core individualist assumption that agents exist independent of one another, and supports the holist view that agency has an inherently relational dimension" (1999:171). If one also wants to consider the causal effects of culture on agents, however, one must assume that culture does not constitute agents all the way down, as a causal relationship can only exist between phenomena that exist independently of one another. In considering the constitutive effects of culture, Wendt has to reject the individualist assumption that agents exist independently of one another. In other words, Wendt's approach is based on the philosophical position of externalism, which is "the view that the content of at least some mental states is constituted by factors external to the mind" (1999:173).

Wendt again employs the concept of supervenience to describe the relationship between collective knowledge and the beliefs of individuals, adding that the

relationship is also characterised by multiple realisability. In other words, collective knowledge cannot exist without individual actors' beliefs but it is also not reducible to them. "Even though particular beliefs may be *sufficient* to realize a cultural form in a given setting, they may not be *necessary*" (1999:164). Accordingly, "structures of collective knowledge and the patterns of behavior to which they give rise do not by definition change simply because their elements have changed" (1999:164). Wendt offers an example relevant to IR to illustrate the constitutive effects of culture. It is necessary to quote at length:

"Consider the effects on behavior and identity of material inequality in two international systems, one in which material dominance is recognized by subordinate states as constituting certain rights and responsibilities on the part of dominant states, and one in which it does not...Assume the dominant states in the two systems engage in the same dominance behaviours: giving military aid to weak states, forbidding them to ally with other Great Powers, intervening in their domestic politics, and so on. Assume, moreover, that they have the same beliefs that what they are doing is their right by virtue of might, and that both hegemons are ignorant of what other states think. The content of those beliefs will nevertheless be different because of the different intersubjective contexts. In one system, their meaning will be constituted as "interference", in the other as "assistance", in one as "legitimate", in the other as "illegitimate" (1999:176).

In order for his synthetic view to succeed, Wendt advocates a moderate rather than a radical holism, which means he has to resolve the apparent contradiction in asserting that agents are both independent of culture and dependent on it. This involves answering the question how agents and structure can be both mutually constituted and co-determined, or how a synthesis of holism and individualism is possible (1999:180). He does this by distinguishing between individuality per se, which refers to an agent's properties that are not dependent on social context, and the social terms of individuality, referring to an agent's properties that depend on shared meanings or culture. He uses the example of sovereignty to illustrate his argument: it is based both on intrinsic properties, like authority over territory, and mutual recognition.

Wendt is aware of the fact that if one assumes that "agents are constructed by society and that structure is continually in process", this might "seem to suggest that society is infinitely changeable and even highly unstable". Consequently, he places significant emphasis on addressing the misconception that, because constructivists argue that reality is socially constructed, they are also implying it must be easy to change. He admits that while one reason for emphasising processes of social construction is to highlight possibilities of change that might otherwise not be seen, this is no implication of the argument that change is easy. Defining the structure of the international system as a distribution of ideas does serve to call our attention to the possibility that those ideas, and with them the term 'logic of anarchy' might change. It should not, however, be interpreted as implying that structural change is easy or even possible in historical circumstances. In fact, Wendt argues, "if anything the opposite is true, because the dialectical relationship between culture and agency suggests the following hypothesis: *culture is a self-fulfilling prophecy*" (Wendt, 1999:186, emphasis in original). At the same time, he is quick to emphasise that adding culture to structure does not leave us back in neorealist determinism, noting that culture can only be a self-fulfilling prophecy through the actions of the agents who carry it. In other words, "Despite having a conservative bias, therefore, culture is always characterised by more or less contestation among its carriers, which is a constant resource for structural change" (1999:188)[13].

Forming the basis of Wendt's theory of transformation is his assumption that, while the structure of the international system is assumed to be one of anarchy, anarchy is compatible with more than one kind of structure and therefore 'logic'. While anarchic structures do construct their elements, these structures vary at the macro-level and can therefore have multiple logics. In contrast to the neorealist view that anarchies are inherently self-help systems that tend to produce military competition, balances of power and war, Wendt argues that the shared idea of anarchy can have at least three kinds of structure at the macro-level, based on what kind of roles dominate the system.[14] Thus it is not that anarchic systems have no structure or logic, but rather

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[13] For the sources of this contestation, see Wendt (1999:188).

[14] This follows on from the argument developed in his 1987 article '*Anarchy is what states make of it*'.

that these are a function of social structures, not anarchy. By arguing that the shared ideas or culture of an anarchic system largely make up its social structure, it follows that anarchy is in fact an "empty vessel" (1999:309) with no predetermined logic, but able to be 'filled' with a Hobbesian, Lockean or Kantian culture[15]. These cultures are based on roles in which states cast each other: in a Hobbesian culture, states see each other as enemies, in a Lockean cultures as rivals and in a Kantian culture as friends. Having thus based his theory on an idealist structural level, Wendt proposes three different collective identities of the interstate system, which function as the broad scope conditions for understanding the agency roles-identities and thus the behaviour of states[16].

He subsequently refutes the argument that the deep structure of international politics has hardly ever changed, arguing that, after centuries of a Hobbesian culture, in the 17th century European states founded a Lockean culture. He further argues that in the late 20th century the international system started undergoing another structural change, to a Kantian culture of collective security. He admits that so far this change is limited to the West, and even there it is still tentative, but a case can be made that change is happening (1999:314).

Krasner offers a number of counterarguments to Wendt's contention that the fact that there has been no major war between major powers since World War II because states have increasingly internalised certain norms which cast other powerful states as 'friends' rather than 'rivals'. He dismisses Wendt's explanation as unlikely, citing the Cold War antagonism between the Soviet Union and the United States, and the large number of conflicts that do not involve direct clashes between the major states (Krasner, 2000:135). Furthermore, in contrast to Wendt's hypothesis that the main change in the international system – the move from a Lockean to Kantian culture – has been the result of ideational changes, Krasner argues that the biggest change has in fact been material, namely the advent of nuclear weapons. He argues that the

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[15] Wendt (1999:247) notes that these three terms are adapted from language used by Martin Wight and the English school. He emphasises that he does not, however "claim adherence to their views; the labels are intended merely as metaphors or stylized representations".

[16] The behavioural tendencies each of these different cultures results in is explained in detail in chapter 6 of *STIP* (see Wendt, 1999:246-312).

possibility of mutual destruction has induced an unprecedented level of caution in international politics. He concludes, "Material forces...have induced more powerful constraints than the weak and contested norms associated with sovereignty". According to Wendt's argument, however, while material forces matter, what is more important is how states view each other and what the system's dominant culture is. He illustrates this point very effectively in *STIP* when he notes how "... five hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the US that five North Korean ones because of the shared understandings that underpin them" (1999:255).

Wendt thus argues that changing intersubjective understandings lead to different cultures of anarchy that vary in their propensity for conflict. He contends that states can and have transformed the culture of anarchy through interaction and identity change. To this end, he introduces four key variables (interdependence, common fate, homogenization and self-restraint) that contribute to collective identity formation[17]. In terms of the mechanisms of change, Wendt focuses on the creation and reproduction of identities. According to Wendt's theory, interaction between states can lead to a redefinition of the self (Ego) and the other (Alter). He argues that role-taking between states can either lead to a reproduction of actors' existing views of self and other, or a transformation of the shared ideational structure. For example, for Kantian identities to emerge, it is necessary for the Self to start treating the Other as a friend. But "structural reproduction too is caused by a continuous process of interaction that has *re*production as its intended or unintended consequence" (1999:186). It follows that "[i]n both a causal and a constitutive sense, therefore, structure is an ongoing effect of process, at the same time that process is an effect of structure" (1999:186).

Importantly, Wendt contends that, because cultures are macro-level phenomena, they only become unstable when enough important actors change their behaviour that a tipping point is crossed. In other words, cultural change requires not only that identities change, but that their frequency and distribution cross a threshold at which the logic of the structure tips over into a new logic. For example, a Lockean culture with 200 members will not change just because two of its members acquire a Kantian identity, unless perhaps they are also its superpowers, in which case other states may

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[17] For more detail on these variables, see Wendt (1999:343-369).

follow suit (1999:365). This raises a number of questions: How does one determine when this 'tipping point' has been reached? Does the threshold differ depending on the issue area? What induces identities to change? What role do agents of change play? What is the role of norms and norm entrepreneurs? Questions of what actually causes change are thus largely left unaddressed. Wendt notes that the spread of capitalism and democracy have important transformative potential in that they produce in states a disposition toward other states of self-restraint and engagement (Wendt, 2000:179). How capitalism and democracy are promoted, however, and why they have become more widespread than other forms of production and political organisation, remain unanswered questions. Finnemore and Sikkink have produced some interesting work exploring these questions[18].

Ringmar's criticism of Wendt's earlier (i.e. pre-*STIP*) work still seems to apply, despite the fact that Wendt has tried to address it by including a process component, namely the micro structure which is to provide the mechanism of transition between the different anarchies. Ringmar (1997) asks whether the structurationist research programme advanced by Wendt is at all feasible for the study of IR, especially with regard to explaining change. He concludes that it is not, reasoning that "the relationship which Wendt posits between agents and structures is still far too mechanistic. Wendt's structures produce agents which produce structures which produce agents, but nowhere in this ever-continuing oscillation is there space for anything *new* and *unexpected* to appear". Ringmar continues, "...the *sources* of change still are left unaccounted for. What is missing from this framework is quite simply a convincing theory of action" (1997:276). Drulak (2001) agrees with this reading of Wendt, arguing that his theory in *STIP* continues to lack a historical and hermeneutic base.

According to Wendt's depiction of structural transformation, one might be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that, despite his dualistic approach to the agent-structure debate, it would appear as though the sources of change lie within agents (states). Wendt's context of shared culture between actors is created by discursive social

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[18] See Finnemore, M. and Sikkink, K. (1998) 'International Norm Dynamics and Political Change', *International Organization*, vol. 52: 887-917.

practices, which means that ultimately only states have the ability to change this shared culture by their actions and interactions. After all, to use Wendt's famous phrase, "anarchy is what states make of it". And yet, contrary to what this might imply, Wendt insists that he advocates a systemic, rather than a unitary, approach to studying the international system.

A further implication of Wendt's conceptualisation of the international system is that there is no relationship between the extent of shared ideas or culture in a system and the extent of co-operation. In contrast to most IR scholarship, Wendt thus believes that culture may constitute conflict or co-operation. It follows that a Hobbesian war of all against all can be as much a cultural form as Kantian collective security. One could therefore argue that, in relation to how the concept is generally understood in the social sciences, Wendt's definition of culture is a particularly thin one. He argues that as long as actors share some kind of knowledge of behavioural norms (even if these are conflictual) they share a culture.

Wendt consequently develops a matrix (see Wendt, 1999:254, figure 4) which depicts how international systems can be in any one of nine possible modes at any given time. The matrix consists of the three 'cultures of anarchy' or 'degrees of co-operation' on the horizontal axis (Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian), and three 'degrees of internalisation' of norms (coerced, self-interested, norm-internalised) on the vertical axis). There are a number of problems inherent in such a depiction of the international system. As Copeland (2000:207) points out, "Wendt assumes that a state knows not only which of the nine boxes it is in, but which box the other is in. This requires knowing why, if for example the other is acting in a friendly manner, it is doing so (in other words, is it conforming to a norm because it believes it is in its interest (2nd degree) or because it believes in the inherent value of the norm (3rd degree)?"

Here I must agree to a certain extent with Copeland (2000:188) that one of the main flaws in Wendt's critique of structural realism is his avoidance of the problem of uncertainty. He holds that "the question of uncertainty is critical to understanding the differences between structural realism and constructivism" (2000:200) and argues that this is where Wendt's analysis falls short. Wendt briefly addresses the issue by

saying that, in today's world, uncertainty is no longer such a major issue. He claims that states today know and are able to learn a lot about other states' behaviour and thinking (1999:281). While this may be increasingly the case between a limited number of like-minded states, I believe one can safely say that, empirically, uncertainty remains an important issue that cannot be ignored. A related problem is that of deception. Copeland (2000:182) criticises Wendt for being overly optimistic and even naïve for assuming that states are "making genuine efforts to express their true views and to cast the other in roles that they believe in". Largely as a result of his state-centrism, Wendt cannot include changes in the nature of units in his theory of change. Ultimately, by bracketing off unit-level processes, Wendt faces a dilemma. For, according to Copeland, "It is the very mutability of polities as emphasized by domestic-level constructivists – that states may change because of domestic processes independent of international interaction – that makes prudent leaders so concerned about the future" (2000:188).

Another area of contention is Wendt's apparent disregard for the role that power relations between states can play in bringing about or shaping the direction of change. While Wendt refers to the importance of power - "having more power means Ego can induce Alter to change its definition of the situation more in light of Ego's than vice versa" – he fails to really address the impact of asymmetrical power relations on change. In other words, he assumes that interaction between units (states) takes place on the basis of equal relationships. In a response to critics' appraisals of *STIP*, Wendt admits that he neglected what are very important hierarchical and power relations in international politics, and hopes "very much that someone will write its companion, on the social theory of dominant-subordinate relationships between states". He adds, "These relationships pose more of a hard case for constructivist arguments than does sovereignty because they seem to come down to material capabilities..." (Wendt, 2000:178). Without stating so explicitly, one can only assume that he is again relying on one of his favourite arguments, namely that one cannot analyse everything at once, to justify leaving out the role of power relations. One could, however, ask whether leaving out an issue which could have a tremendous impact on the results of one's theory, and arguably be an important source of change, can be justified.

Finally, one could turn Wendt's criticism of Waltz against him, namely that his conception of change is too narrow. According to Wendt, the international system has only experienced one structural change thus far (from a Hobbesian to a Lockean culture). Whilst conceding more opportunities for structural change, Wendt's conception of such change nevertheless remains limited to transitions between different versions of anarchy. Relatedly, while Wendt's theory applies to the Westphalian state system, it cannot provide a more transhistorical account of change.

In conclusion, an important question flowing from Wendt's conceptualisation of change is whether it is inevitable that anarchies will move from Hobbesian to Lockean to Kantian structures (i.e. whether change in the international system is always progressive). He argues that, while there is no guarantee that there will be progression, it is unlikely that there will be regression. In other words, once a Lockean culture has been internalised there is little chance of it degenerating into a Hobbesian one. The reasoning behind this is that with each higher international culture states acquire rights – for example the right of sovereignty in the Lockean case – that they will be loathe to give up. "Thus, if ever there is no guarantee that the future of the international system will be better than its past, at least there is reason to think that it will not be worse" (Wendt, 1999:311-312).

2.7   Normative implications of change

One of the most important implications of *STIP* is the development of a convincing argument of the transformative potentials of the contemporary international system. This normative component of Wendt's contribution to IR theory is something for which 1 believe he has not received the acknowledgement he deserves. By reconceptualising the concept of the structure of the international system in more cultural terms, Wendt tries to counter what remains a largely pessimistic and cynical view of international politics amongst IR scholars. Alker is one of the few critics of *STIP* who has noted that perhaps one of Wendt's greatest achievements has been that he "keeps alive for coming generations the hope of practically realizing in the next century, what this century has greatly sought, but failed adequately to achieve: a legitimate international order reinforcing violence-containing progress in world politics" (2000:141).

While one could claim that Wendt, in his quest for a scientific approach, has tried to distance himself from a normative approach to IR by denying the fact that the term idealism has a normative association, the evidence seems to prove differently. Despite the flaws pointed out by critics in the detail of his argument – not all of which I feel are justified – Wendt's *STIP* is valuable for its focus on the potential and the possibility for progressive change in the international system, for transformation towards a more peaceful world.

2.8 How do we make sense of Wendt's approach?

While in IR theory course outlines and textbooks one will generally find Wendt grouped under the constructivist heading, he himself claims, "...the kind of constructivism I favor is thin..." (Wendt, 1999:133). In accepting many realist and institutionalist assumptions and rejecting the 'ideas all the way down' perspective, Wendt has invited much criticism from fellow constructivists, who have been ill at ease with Wendt's identification with constructivism, whilst at the same time advocating scientific realism. The reason for this uneasiness is the apparent contradiction between the two approaches. As Ringmar (1997:282) points out, "according to scientific realism, the *world* creates the representations we have of it; according to constructivism, *we* create the representations we have of the world. Since the two positions cannot be combined, Wendt has to choose between them, and if he wants to be a consistent constructivist, he must reject scientific realism".

Kratochwil, verbalising what many other critics are implying, questions whether Wendt can justifiably call himself a constructivist. He writes, "The issue is not whether somebody says or believes she or he is a constructivist, but whether or not such a (self)-identification makes sense in view of some of the tenets defining constructivism". Kratochwil, too, remains unconvinced that Wendt's commitment to scientific realism and his version of realism are "compatible with constructivism as a metatheoretical orientation" (2000:89). Specifically, it can be argued that, as a self-declared constructivist, Wendt's view of the role of language is underdeveloped. Furthermore, he glosses over the question of how actors and their identities are initially constituted, preferring to focus on how their identities change.

Similarly, Keohane (2000:125) points out that Wendt's attempt to find a middle ground has in fact brought him notably significantly closer than in his previous work to what he calls 'mainstream' IR, while at the same time broadening the gap between his self-proclaimed "thin constructivism" (Wendt, 1999:2) and radical constructivism. Elaborating on this issue, Copeland (2000:191) notes how, for Wendt, constructivism is both too extreme and too limited in its attack on neorealism. It is too extreme in its argument that it is 'ideas all the way down', and that material forces have no independent causal effects on actor behaviour. But "constructivism is too limited when it simply tests ideas as causal factors against realist variables like power and interest, without exploring the degree to which these apparent 'material' variables are really constituted by ideational processes".

Although challenging some, Wendt opts to work within many of the constraints imposed by the mainstream, especially neorealism, such as the focus on states. Guzzini and Leander (2001:319) call this "assuming disciplinary orthodoxy" and one can debate the merits of such an approach. Guzzini and Leander feel that this leads to tension in Wendt's constructivist approach. They also feel that the title of Wendt's book is a misnomer, given that he admits that there is more to international politics than the inter-state system, and yet his theory does not look beyond these limits set by the mainstream. In fact, it re-erects the borders between politics and economics, focusing only on the former. Consequently, "This narrow view of politics has quite limiting consequences for the international theory he can come up with" (Guzzini and Leander, 2001:333).

In other words, one could contend that Wendt's success in reconciling constructivism and realism – advancing a constructivist agenda without rejecting many realist assumptions – is his downfall. He is not challenging the mainstream sufficiently. At least Wendt can not be accused of not wanting to get involved in a cross-paradigm debate. He is addressing the accusation that many constructivists are unwilling to engage in cross-paradigmatic dialogue and prefer to stick to dismissals of other approaches, head on. Wendt has fallen into the trap, however, of, by trying to reconcile the two approaches and convincing both sides of the important contributions of the other, alienating many – but not all. Although there has been considerably more criticism, there has also been support for Wendt's penchant for realism and his

proposal that realism and constructivism are compatible. He has received praise from both sides – interestingly, more so from the 'incumbents' than the challengers!

Barkin (2003:326), for example, contends that "a realist constructivism (or, for that matter, a constructivist realism) is epistemologically, methodologically, and paradigmatically viable". Similarly, Sterling-Folker (2002) rejects the view that constructivist and realist theorising are at opposite ends of the spectrum, and proposes that theoretical bridge-building is possible, and even that "Realism and constructivism need one another to correct their own worst excesses" (2000:74). And so we are witnessing an increasing number of calls for theoretical collaboration between what many regard as contradictory approaches.

Theoretical innovations that diverge from the norm – when successful – as is the case with Wendt – may, however, be self-destructive "...to the extent that they are institutionalised or normalised as part of an ascendant paradigm" (Mittelman, 1997:250). Kratochwil (2000:89) too laments, "By picking and choosing certain parts and tenets and neglecting others, one might establish a position acceptable to all parties. But one accomplishes this feat only by equivocations and by suppressing differences that ought to be examined". I would argue that Wendt cannot be accused of the latter. As noted in the introduction, Wendt's arguments are convincing precisely because he has not picked tenets at random, but has justified his choices by subjecting a range of alternatives to rigorous scrutiny. One must also consider the benefits of engaging the mainstream versus resorting to a stone-throwing approach. Wendt has done something right: after all, his work is being taken seriously, and hence he is able to influence the mainstream.

Despite all the criticism regarding the apparent irreconcilability of Wendt's adoption of an ontological constructivism but an epistemological positivism, I believe that he has largely succeeded in finding a middle ground between the two. By adopting a dual ontology - idealism with a dash of rump materialism, and a dual ontology of agency and structure - Wendt has been able to assimilate apparently contradictory approaches within his theory. Keohane (2000:130) summarises this very poetically when he writes, "I think that Alexander Wendt has made a major contribution to our understanding of world politics by providing the philosophical basis for sustained

scientific attention to issues involving the role of ideas. He has shown convincingly that one does not have to swallow the contaminated epistemological water of postmodernism in order to enjoy the heady ontological wine of constructivism. One can be a sophisticated scientific realist without believing naively in a one-to-one correspondence between observation and reality, or in unproblematic scientific knowledge".

I believe Wendt's dilemma highlights the limits of existing approaches to adequately explain international relations. His attempt to break out of predetermined boundaries has perplexed critics, whose responses to *STIP* have reflected IR's fixation with categorising theorists, and the field's discomfort with those who, like Wendt, refuse to be forced into any particular box. Ultimately, IR scholars all have the same objective: analysing how the international system functions. I do not see why one needs to fit neatly into any particular predetermined category in order to do so effectively. Wendt also calls for methodological pluralism, and for a laying down of arms when it comes to methodological preferences. His appeal for "an epistemological Westphalia, adopting a rule of mutual recognition toward each other's preferred questions and methods" in order to "call off the positivism wars and get on with research about international relations" (2000:170) is a long outstanding one.

As Wendt also notes in the final pages of his book, the debates addressed in *STIP* extend further than questions about the relative value of idealism over materialism or holism over individualism. Ultimately, Wendt seeks to provide an alternative answer to the question of what IR is for. He concludes his book by elaborating on the broader significance of an idealist approach. He writes that, while realism holds that "the culture of international life does not depend on what states do, and IR scholars should therefore take that culture as given – reify it – and focus on helping states do the best that they can within it", idealism "would be the view that the culture of international life does depend on what states do and that IR should therefore focus on showing how states create that culture and so might transform it" (1999:377).

2.9 Summation

The aim of this chapter was to present an overview of Wendt's approach to international relations theory, and particularly the study of change. Wendt prioritises ontological issues in his attempt at finding an alternative to the neorealist worldview, which is based on a materialist and individualist ontology. Instead, he proposes a reconceptualisation of the international system in idealist and holist terms.

From this chapter it emerged that Wendt's overall approach can be characterised as an eclectic one aimed at finding a middle ground between different approaches. Whilst disagreeing with many neorealist assumptions, he maintains that it is possible to incorporate some of them into a constructivist framework. In the same vein, he aims for an epistemological middle ground by showing that a focus on ideas does not have to entail the rejection of a (positivist) scientific epistemology.

Similarly, Wendt develops a complex argument to show how the relationship between agents and structure can at once be independent and dependent, causal and constitutive, arguing that focusing on either structure or agents limits one's analysis. Such a synthetic approach has its problems, however, in that it becomes difficult to convince the reader of the merit of apparently contradictory claims.

Wendt, furthermore, chooses to focus on the ideational structure in his exploration of change, as his understanding of structural transformation is social or cultural change, which involves collective identity formation. To this end, he advocates beginning one's theorising about international politics with the distribution of ideas, and especially culture, in the system and then bringing in material forces, rather than the other way around. Ultimately his reasoning is that, by reconceptualising the structure of the system in idealist terms, conceiving of progressive change becomes possible.

In terms of the materialist-idealist debate, Wendt goes out of his way to distance himself from the more radical constructivist 'ideas all the way down' position. He also succeeds in circumventing criticism regarding constructivism's neglect of material factors by reclaiming certain 'material factors' like power and interests as

ideational factors. The outcome, however, is a highly complex and at times confusing relationship between material forces and ideas.

Forming the basis of Wendt's theory of transformation is his assumption that, while the structure of the international system is assumed to be one of anarchy, anarchy is compatible with more than one kind of structure and therefore 'logic'. He argues that the shared idea of anarchy can have at least three kinds of structure at the macro-level, based on what kind of roles dominate the system: in a Hobbesian culture, states see each other as enemies, in a Lockean cultures as rivals and in a Kantian culture as friends. In summary, Wendt thus argues that changing intersubjective understandings lead to different cultures of anarchy that vary in their propensity for conflict.

Some of the shortcomings of Wendt's theory have also been pointed out, such as the criticism that the sources of change are left unaccounted for, that he fails to address the impact of asymmetrical power relations on change, and that his conception of change is too narrow. Despite all the criticism regarding the apparent irreconcilability of Wendt's adoption of an ontological constructivism and an epistemological positivism, the final conclusion drawn is that he has largely succeeded in finding a middle ground between the two.

Next, the work of John Gerard Ruggie, another author working under the broader constructivist heading, will come under the spotlight. While Ruggie has many similarities with Wendt - for example his focus on the social construction of reality and his incorporation of some neorealist tenets - there are also important differences, not least his focus on an historical understanding of change.

CHAPTER 3

John Gerard Ruggie: 'A paradigmatic case of a non-paradigmatic'*

3.1   Introduction

John Gerard Ruggie is an IR scholar who defies categorisation. Like Wendt, his approach is an eclectic one, aimed first and foremost at achieving a better understanding of international relations, rather than working within the confines of a predetermined paradigm. As Waever* (1997:170) succinctly articulates, "...Ruggie is a paradigmatic case of a non-paradigmatic..." Since the publication of his article *'What makes the World Hang Together?   Neo-utilitarianism and the Social Constructivist Challenge'* in 1998, he however established himself firmly in the social constructivist camp. Previously, he has been labelled a refined neorealist, a structural realist, and a liberal institutionalist[1]. What adds to the confusion is the fact that, as Waever (1997:171) notes, Ruggie has, on occasion, both contributed to mainstream debates *and* criticised them. Ruggie also forms part of that rare breed of scholars who has succeeded in bridging the divide between theory and practice – having served as assistant secretary-general of the United Nations in an advisory capacity.

Additionally, he has not focused his research on a particular theme, but has written about issues ranging from institutionalisation and regimes through American foreign policy to the value of social constructivism in explaining transformation. It is the latter subject that will be the main concern of this chapter, although the work he has done on other subjects will be consulted on the basis of how it contributes to his understanding of global political transformation.

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[1] See Waever (1997:171).

By his own account[2] Ruggie has always had a special interest in international transformation, although he sometimes "...put this project on inactive status..." while continuing with other work. Consequently, Ruggie has played an important part in the debate surrounding whether, and to what degree, the international system was changing, from the late 1970s onwards. He has consistently lamented the lack of understanding of transformation in IR theory scholarship: "The long and short of it is that we are not very good as a discipline at studying the possibility of fundamental discontinuity in the international system; that is, addressing the question of whether the modern system of states may be yielding in some instances to postmodern forms of configuring political space. We lack even an adequate vocabulary; and what we cannot describe, we cannot explain" (1998a:175).

3.2   Exploring transformation and criticising Waltz

Like many other authors working outside or on the fringes of mainstream IR, Ruggie bases his exploration of structural transformation on a critique of Waltz's 1979 *Theory of International Politics*. Incidentally, Waltz and Ruggie were colleagues at Berkeley in the mid-1970s while Waltz was working on his innovative and widely influential reconstruction of classical realism. In his review[3] of *Theory of International Politics,* Ruggie notes that according to Waltz, there are only two ways in which change can occur in the system. The first – which he calls "within-system change" takes place when there is a reordering of the relative capabilities of states in the system, for example a change from a bipolar to a multipolar system. Change *of* the system, however, can only happen if there is a change of the system's structure – in other words, anarchy is replaced with hierarchy. Ruggie's concern is that such a rigid and limited view of the possibilities of change call into question neorealism's ability to describe or even conceive of change. He uses the example of the transformation from the medieval to the modern international which, though both systems are anarchical, clearly differ in ways which go beyond variation in the distribution of capabilities among the actors.

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[2] See Ruggie (1998a: 131-132).

[3] Ruggie, J.G. (1983) "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Towards a Neorealist Synthesis" in *World Politics*, vol.35, no.2: 261-285.

Accordingly, while he regards the end of the Cold War as illustrative of a shift in the distribution of power amongst state actors in the international system, he notes that a more important process of change is occurring at a deeper level, namely at the level of the political organisation of the international system. A change at this level, he contends, "would involve a shift not in the play of power politics so much as of the stage on which that play is performed" (1998a:173). Given these statements, Neufeld's depiction of Ruggie as a mainstream interpretive theorist, whose "failure to recognize that an interpretive analysis can be extended beyond a study of regulatory international institutions to include the global orders in which those institutions are 'nested'…serves to reinforce the notion that the global order is natural and fixed…" (1995:93) appears, in hindsight, to be misplaced.

Ruggie argues that an important dimension of change is absent from Waltz's theory as a result of the fact that he eliminates the differentiation of units as an analytical component of political structure. He furthermore charges that the basis on which Waltz does this – namely taking differentiation to refer to differences between units rather than separateness – is inaccurate, as "The modern system is distinguished from the medieval not by "sameness'" or "differences" of units, but by *the principles on the basis of which the constituent units are separated* from one another" (1983: 274, emphasis in original). In practice, this structural variation means that while the medieval system was based on a heteronomous organisation of political space, the modern system is characterised by territorially disjoint, mutually exclusive sovereign states, or a homonomous structuring of territorial space (1983:274-275 and 1998a:145-151;179-180).

While accepting Waltz's notion of anarchy, Ruggie thus argues that systemic change is possible if one makes distinctions in terms of how the units are constituted. He points out that, while anarchy is a characteristic of both the modern system of states and the medieval system, it hardly follows that there are no significant changes between the two systems.

Ruggie writes, "…the distinctive feature of the modern system of rule is that it has differentiated its subject collectivity into territorially defined, fixed, and mutually exclusive enclaves of legitimate dominion…Without the concept of differentiation,

then, it is impossible to define the modern era in international politics...Hence the irony of Waltz's continued insistence that the dimension of differentiation "drops out" from the neorealist model of international structure, on the dubious ground that the differentiation of a collectivity into its constituent units is an attribute of the units rather than the collectivity" (1998a:180). It follows, then, that by preserving differentiation as an analytical component of structure, one is able not only to explain the transformation from the medieval to the modern states system, but also to contemplate transformation from the current system to a future one (1983:279).

Ruggie further criticises Waltz's model on the grounds that it lacks a determinant of change, namely what Durkheim calls 'dynamic density', by which he means "...the quantity, velocity, and diversity of transactions that go on within society..." (Ruggie, 1983:281). The term can be interpreted as referring to the same phenomenon than Buzan and Little (2000) call 'interaction capacity'. This is assumed to be something apart from both units and structure, yet forming part of the overall system. Ruggie attributes the transformation from the medieval to the state system to "a level of dynamic density of sufficient magnitude" to prompt new principles of political differentiation (1998a:172).

He proceeds to identify three reasons for Waltz's neglect of dynamic density as a source of change. The first is due to the fact that Waltz, as already discussed, drops the differentiation of units as the second analytical component of political structure. As a result, Ruggie argues that Waltz is overlooking the impact that dynamic density can have on the structure of property rights, which is one of the characteristic principles of any social formation. He uses the transformation from the medieval to the modern international system as a case in point, claiming that "...it is not an unreasonable hypothesis that any transformation beyond the modern international system will represent a similar instance" (1983:282).

The second is the result of his failure to achieve a generative formulation of international political structure. Consequently, "...one circuit through which the effects of dynamic density could register at the systems level is severed". Ruggie also

criticises Waltz for shifting from a generative[4] to a descriptive conception of structure when evaluating possible sources of change (1983:283). He recommends that Waltz ask whether changes in the distribution of capabilities are able to suppress the underlying organisational pressures resulting from the anarchical structure of the international system, holding that "The answer to *this* question provides that basis for predicting the constraining and conditioning consequences of structure..." (1983:284, emphasis in original).

The final reason is that, due to Waltz's rejection of reductionism, his model assumes that only structural change can cause systemic change, and unit-level processes are to be disregarded as they can have no influence at the system level. Ruggie points out the problem with this assumption, namely that "...in any social system, structural change itself ultimately has no source *other than* unit-level processes. By banishing these from the domain of systemic theory, Waltz also exogenizes the ultimate source of systemic change" (1983:285, emphasis in original).

Ironically, Waever (1997:193) accuses Ruggie of being guilty of exactly the same thing. He argues that Ruggie emphasises the importance of structure at the expense of unit-level forces, noting that "Ruggie's structures are powerful and partly self-sustaining *qua* generative..." and "Ruggie seems to respect structure more..." Waever's claims thus seem to contradict Ruggie's own assertions on this topic, the most explicit being his criticism of Waltz's disregard for unit-level processes. Elsewhere, he argues that one should not stop at identifying the possibility of system transformation at the macro level. He contends that factors at the micro level which have transformative potential should also be addressed – and proceeds to refer to the work on the growing role of nongovernmental actors and global civil society as a case in point (1998b:876). In support of Ruggie's position, Teschke and Heine (2002:168) claim that he does, in fact, focus on domestic factors. According to them, "Ruggie's core argument centres around domestic state-society relations that generate what he calls 'social purpose'".

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[4] In a generative structure, the deeper structural levels have causal priority, and the structural levels closer to the surface of visible phenomena take effect only within a context that is already "prestructured" by the deeper levels.

At the same time, however, Ruggie (1998a:137) believes that "The concept of structure is central to the study of transformation", and acknowledges the contributions of Giddens's structuration theory, which argues that structures both constrain actors but also enable them to act in ways that could lead to a transformation of the structure, by preventing the 'reification of structure' (1998a:26). In the spirit of much constructivist work, it would appear that he has opted for the middle ground – in other words, accepting that in some cases unit-level factors need to be emphasised, and at other times structural factors, but never at the expense of the other.

3.3   Ruggie's interpretive approach

Ruggie's criticism of mainstream conceptions of transformation does not end with Waltz.   In subsequent articles he criticises the positivist approach adopted by mainstream IR theories for failing to adequately deal with the phenomenon of change. His approach to addressing this problem constitutes another major theme that runs through his work – namely the idea that international relations is very much socially constructed.   This also extends to his conceptualisation of the structure of the international system, which he regards as being "suffused with ideational factors" (1998b:879).

One of his most important earlier works on this topic was an article written in collaboration with Friedrich Kratochwil[5], in which the two scholars explored the role of norms in explanation. They argued that positivist models of explanation are not effective in cases where norms play an important role, as is the case with international regimes.   This is because norms contradict two components of the deductive-nomological explanations that are characteristic of positivism.   Firstly, although norms can be said to inspire, guide or justify behaviour, they can only rarely be said to cause behaviour.   Secondly, with regard to the rule in deductive-nomological explanations that even one counterfactual occurrence can be said to invalidate the covering law, norms are counterfactually valid.   In other words, "No single counterfactual occurrence refutes a norm", as even if the norm is violated, it does not

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[5] Kratochwil, F. and Ruggie, J.G. (1986) "International Organization: A State of the Art on an Art of the State" in *International Organization*, vol. 40, no.4: 753-75.

follow that it is invalidated (1998a:97). The underlying argument is that "...positivism is a problematic basis for explaining social phenomena...in which a significant role is played by ideas, norms, and social institutions" (1998a:100).

More specifically, Ruggie and Kratwochwil argued that the positivist analysis employed in regime analysis contradicts the inherently intersubjective nature of its ontology: "...in the simulated world, actors cannot communicate *through* behavior. In the real world, the situation of course differs fundamentally" (1998a:97-98, emphasis in original). This approach thus contradicts the fact that the values and norms which regime theory highlights are intersubjectively constituted and therefore demand a more interpretive[6] approach (Waever, 1997:179 and Wendt, 1992:393). They thus call for an emphasis on interpretation, arguing that the reflections of the actors are central to institutions, and that norms and regimes are intersubjective phenomena and thus cannot be studied using positivist methods.

Subsequently, some writers, notably Neufeld (1995) have described Ruggie's methodology as interpretive[7]. In its most general form, an interpretive approach is understood to emphasise the importance of intersubjective meanings. Before continuing, it is therefore important, by means of a slight detour, to have a closer look at what exactly such an approach entails, and what the relevance of intersubjectivity is. The best place to start is perhaps to compare an interpretive approach to a scientific approach, positivism being the variant the field of IR has been most receptive to. This leads us to an age-old debate in the philosophy of science between approaches advocating explanation and those advocating understanding. To avoid becoming too entangled in what remains an unresolved philosophical debate, the discussion here will but touch on the outlines of the broader debate, and will centre on its applicability to the field of IR.

Hollis and Smith (1990:87) distinguish between explanation and understanding in the following manner: "To understand is to reproduce the order in the minds of actors; to

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[6] Some scholars, notably Hollis and Smith (1990) call it an "interpretative" approach.

[7] See Frost (1996:23-30) for a discussion of the development of interpretive theory, as well as its shortcomings.

explain is to find causes in the scientific manner". Dessler (1999:128) also maintains that the main factor distinguishing positivism from alternatives like an interpretivist approach is its inherently explanatory logic, the main requirement of which is that "an explanation establish the phenomenon it explains as something that was to be expected in the circumstances where it occurred". The idea of expectability is also important as, in contrast, interpretivists "define explanation in terms of *intelligibility* rather than expectability". Accordingly, "an interpretivist explanation is achieved when the strange is made familiar, or when phenomena are brought under appropriate concepts", rather than when they are explained (Dessler, 1999:128).

If we turn to the field of IR, one could say that, from a positivist vantage point, it is seen as something which one can observe and analyse from an external vantage point. Furthermore, the focus is on finding explanations, in the form of causes. In contrast, following an interpretivist approach, the actors involved in international relations are an integral part of understanding how things work – including their interpretation of and reaction to events. For positivists, thus, the social world, like the natural world, is an independent, and to a certain extent predictable phenomenon, while for interpretivists it is a social construction. Additionally, in contrast to positivism, which focuses on structural and systemic forces and can thus be regarded as a holistic approach, interpretivism is more individualistic in nature (Hollis and Smith, 1990:1-6).

Mainstream IR theories, despite their differences, are united in their scientific approach to the study of IR, in other words, using methods long employed by the natural sciences to find causes and laws of behaviour in international relations. This involves the assumption that it is possible to test hypotheses, based on a theory of how the world works, against observations made in the independent world. As Hollis and Smith rightly note, however, facts in the social world are more elusive than that. In a field like international relations, "[e]ven facts of observation need interpreting before they can be counted on..." (Hollis and Smith, 1990:66). It is for this reason that there can be a multiplicity of theories alleging to base their observations and conclusions on the same facts. Ruggie too has noted that while positivists have employed various methods ranging from statistics and experiments in trying to improve their causal deductions, the lack of large sets of observational data, and the virtual impossibility of

subjecting causal variables at the international level to manipulation should be a reminder that "the social world is inherently indeterminate" and any statements of causality should be regarded with the utmost suspicion (Ruggie, 1998a:92-93).

For many scholars, including those who advocate an interpretivist approach, it is therefore obvious that the social world differs from the natural world, and should be studied using different methods. Hollis and Smith (1990:68-70) point out four important ways in which this difference is clear. Firstly, unlike actors in the natural world – whether they be animals or inanimate objects - "people find meaning in their experience". Secondly, language is an important component of social life, and social actors find meaning in ideas. It follows that, "what people mean by their actions depends on what ideas inform their actions", and ultimately, "the context of the action cannot be divorced from the actors' understanding of the context". This brings us to one of the main tasks of social, including IR theory, namely to "find a meaning in actions and events, which may elude all the actors involved". Some scholars working in the positivist tradition will argue that these considerations should play no part in the study of international relations, which, due to its nature, should be analysed at the systemic level. Proponents of an interpretivist approach, however, believe that by taking into account the different kinds of meaning that play a role in the social world, we move beyond the scope of scientific method. They therefore propose to make meaning central and construct a method peculiar to the social world, leading to a hermeneutic or interpretivist approach.

We now turn our focus to the concept of intersubjectivity, which is an integral part of an interpretivist approach. Positivists differ with regard to the significance they attach to subjective meanings. Within the broader positivist approach, the so-called "strict behaviouralists" maintain that, due to the fact that subjective meanings held by individuals cannot be regarded as empirical evidence, they cannot be taken into account when explaining social phenomena. "Meaning-oriented behaviouralists", on the other hand, attempt to integrate subjective meanings into their explanations, but treat them only as intervening variables. (Neufeld, 1995:73-75).

In contrast, interpretive theorists disagree with the positivist notion that human consciousness is nothing more than the sum-total of the subjective meanings of

individuals. Instead, they emphasise the importance of *inter*-subjective meanings, which "are the product of the collective self-interpretations and self-definitions of human communities" (Neufeld, 1995:77). In other words, intersubjective understanding rests on the fact that ideas are not just held by individuals, but are held collectively. It is important to note, however, that intersubjective meanings are more than just a simple aggregation of the beliefs of individuals. As Adler (1997:327) emphasises, intersubjective meanings "persist beyond the lives of individual social actors, embedded in social routines and practices as they are reproduced by interpreters who participate in their production and workings. Intersubjective meanings have structural attributes that do not merely constrain or empower actors. They also define social reality. At the same time, the concept of intersubjectivity neither assumes a collective mind nor disavows the notion that, although 'each of us thinks his own thoughts; our concepts we share with our fellow men'".

A further implication of an intersubjective understanding is that parts of the social world exist purely because they are believed to exist or are validated by people. Ruggie clearly adopts this view when he writes that human beings lend the world significance, and create social facts[8] which depend on human agreement that they exist (e.g. money). "Because actors have the capacity to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it, they are able to critically reflect on the social practices which they engage in" (1998b:856). Taylor (in Neufeld, 1995:78) builds on the idea that, in opposition to the positivist belief, "[w]e have to admit that intersubjective social reality is not made up of brute data alone...[w]e have to admit that intersubjective social reality has to be partly defined in terms of meanings; that meanings as subjective are not just in causal interaction with a social reality made up of brute data, but that as intersubjective they are constitutive of this reality". Intersubjective meanings are believed to create a "web of meaning", which is both constitutive of behaviour, while at the same time it is instantiated through behaviour (Neufeld, 1995:75-77). By exploring the intersubjective nature of certain accepted norms in international relations, such as sovereignty, Ruggie argues this also opens up

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[8] Palan (2000:581) uses the terms "social institutions" and "social objects" as being "constituted by the description actors and participants give it; they have no existence independent of their beliefs and utterances..."

the possibilities of understanding how collective intentionality can bring about change in the system (1998b:869-870).

One could therefore claim, as Neufeld (1995:82) does, that "...the objective of an interpretive approach is to re-express the relationship between 'intersubjective meanings', which derive from self-interpretation and self-definition, and the social practices in which they are embedded and which they constitute...in order to exercise critical judgment". With regard to IR specifically, Neufeld argues, "...interpretive social science directs us to see that the coercive state practices which make up the 'balance of power' can and should be analysed...to uncover the intersubjective meanings which constitute those practices and which are simultaneously instantiated through them" (1995:89).

From the above discussion, it should be clear that an interpretive and a constructivist approach, as it is generally understood, have much in common. In fact, it is generally accepted that constructivism developed out of an interpretive approach. Adler (1997:319) on the other hand, asserts that constructivism forms a middle ground between rationalist and interpretivist approaches. Importantly, however, he also notes that "constructivism does not build on the relativist implications of interpretive epistemology, but on the ontological implications of *Verstehen*" (Adler, 1997:326). In terms of methodology, it needs to be noted that not all forms of constructivism in IR follow an interpretivist approach. Some, like Wendt's constructivism, although also professing the social construction of the international system and its intersubjective nature, prefer to study it using positivist methods.

One could however justifiably say that Ruggie practices social constructivism, using an interpretivist methodology. In other words, returning to the most basic distinction between interpretivist and positivist approaches, Ruggie's aim is to *understand* rather than to *explain* international relations. Adopting the general constructivist assumption that the social world is constructed, his approach is interpretivist in that he tries to unravel and understand the underlying meanings that constitute social practices and institutions.

Despite the fact that Ruggie has, on numerous occasions pointed out that understanding transformation requires an approach quite different to that found in most mainstream IR theories, some critics argue that he remains committed to a positivist ontology. Dessler (1999:124), for example, points out that, according to Friedman and Starr (1997) "the interpretivist claims advanced by constructivists such as Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie are compatible with a positivist epistemology". Much of this criticism has also come from critical theorists leaning towards postmodernism, who have accused Ruggie and other constructivists of remaining caught in a positivist framework, and in so doing compromising some of the principles of the Third Debate. It is possible to identify some aspects of positivism, like generalisation, in some of Ruggie's work. As a result of his exploration of the transformation from the medieval to the modern international system, Ruggie (1983) has suggested that the catalysts of future change will most probably be similar: changes in the material environment, strategic behaviour, and social epistemology. As Price and Reus-Smit (2002:1798) point out, however, Ruggie does not regard these forces "as timeless determinants of human social and political life. In fact, ...they are nothing more than analytical categories, the content of which is necessarily historically and culturally contingent. He thus denies the possibility of developing a grand theory of change..."

One could thus argue that, while Ruggie has engaged in a certain amount of generalisation - something normally associated with a positivist research agenda - his generalisations are different from those required by positivism, as the forces and factors they identify "are not treated as context-free independent variables that may be transferred unproblematically..." In this sense, constructivists thus reject "the possibility and desirability of formulating law like generalizations while maintaining the possibility of more contingent generalisations ..." (Price and Reus-Smit, 2002:1797).

Often the criticism is based on what one might describe as splitting hairs over terminology used. A case in point is the accusation by George (1994:15) who accuses Ruggie's approach of "bristl[ing] with the tensions between [his] 'open' liberal inclinations and the closure of [his] behavioralist training rituals", based on his use of terms employed in positivism. Price and Reus-Smit (2002:1794-1795) however point

out that these same critics, notably George and Campbell, could be found equally guilty of using vocabulary associated with positivism. They justifiably point out that "any serious evaluation of constructivist scholarship...must look beyond the terminology employed to the underlying logic of analysis" (2002:1795).

In conclusion, the problem with this criticism is that it underpins the positivist dichotomy between objective explanation and normative theory. Whilst providing a valuable discussion of an interpretivist approach, Hollis and Smith (1990) crystallised this separation by reinforcing the dichotomy between explaining and understanding. As a result, many IR theorists have come to treat explanation and understanding as separate things, appropriate to different objects. As was stated in Chapter One, the positivist claim that social research is either empirical and based on scientific methods or normative and subjective, must be rejected. Instead, as Morgan (2002:109-110) suggests, we must accept that "the interpretive process is also conducive to explanation because why, how, what, and where we interpret are significant issues of social constitution by conscious reflective beings in relatively instransitive conditions, the social relationality of which cannot be absolutely reduced to the individual's sense of the engagement". Interpretation or understanding and explanation should therefore not be regarded as mutually exclusive. In fact, according to Sørensen (1998:89) "All the major traditions in social science, be they liberal, conservative, or Marxist, embrace this middle ground of combining subjective understanding and objective explanation". This middle ground position needs to be more generally adopted in IR.

3.4 The social construction of the international system: implications for understanding change

Let us continue by considering Ruggie's professed commitment to a social constructivist approach. Although he is not as explicit as Wendt in explaining his choice of methodology, he does go to some lengths to espouse his preference for the social constructivist approach[9]. The underlying assumption is that the international system is socially constructed – in other words, the building blocks of international reality are ideational as well as material. It is important to note at the outset that

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[9] See Ruggie (1998b).

constructivism, in general - there are exceptions - does not ignore or marginalise the role of material factors, as some have accused it of doing. It does, however, call for the inclusion of ideational factors in any analysis of the international system. This is in direct response to the neorealist treatment of the international system, which reduces everything to material factors.

Ruggie's appeal for the inclusion of ideational factors in understanding the social world, including the phenomenon of transformation of the international system, thus has its roots in what he regards as the discounting of ideational factors in mainstream IR. He holds that when ideational factors are considered in the neo-utilitarian perspectives of neoliberalism and neorealism, it is only done in as far as they contribute to the pursuit of material interests (1998b:855).

In exploring the factors that played a role in the emergence of the modern system of states, Ruggie (1993) identifies both material factors like military technology and economic relations as well as social epistemology. Under changes in the material environment he includes factors that a number of scholars of state building[10] have explored in detail, such as population growth, increase in trade, revenue raising, etc. He asserts that these changes placed strain on existing social arrangements, resulting in a need and a desire for transformation, and causing them ultimately to be replaced. Furthermore, he suggests that the material changes impacted on the existing institutional order by changing the constraints on and opportunities for social actors, resulting in new forms of social interaction[11] (1998a:182).

This would initially appear to be a materially driven theory of transformation. Ruggie does not, however, leave things there. He notes that such a theory, which sets out that the modern international state system was functionally determined, has some shortcomings. Whilst there may have been functional pressure for political units to grow, there is no sufficient explanation for why they specifically evolved into a system of sovereign, territorially defined, mutually exclusive states (1998a:183-184). As Ruggie and other writers note, the Italian city-states or the Hanse were equally

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[10] See, for example, van Creveld (1999).

[11] See Ruggie (1998a:182-184) for examples.

viable political alternatives. Consequently, Ruggie claims that "Fundamental international transformation – the medieval to modern shift, for example, or a shift from the modern to some postmodern form of organising political space on the planet – is well beyond the grasp of physicalist conceptions of structure" (1989:30). In other words, the argument is that ideational factors were instrumental in determining the *type* of social arrangement that emerged.

The assumption is that, besides the existence of material factors, society also had to *imagine* itself in a different form before transformation could occur. This involved conceiving of new rules and identities, and propagating certain norms like the idea of private ownership and sovereignty. Ruggie is thus not satisfied with accepting structures and circumstances in international relations and their subsequent influence as given. He suggests that we need to explore how the circumstances we find ourselves in came about, and how we interpret and act upon them (1998b:876-877). He holds that "… 'making history' in the new era is a matter not merely of defending the national interest but of defining it, nor merely enacting stable preferences but constructing them. These processes are constrained by forces in the object world, and instrumental rationality is ever present. But they also deeply implicate such ideational factors as identities and aspirations…" (1998b:878).

Ruggie proceeds to identify changes in social epistemology that played an important role in the rise of the state system. As he puts it "the mental equipment that people drew upon in imagining and symbolizing forms of political community itself underwent fundamental change" (1998a:184). These include religious principles, linguistics, and the invention of the single-point perspective. The significance of the latter is that, previously, artists had depicted their subject matters from a variety of angles, which one could conceptually link to the overlapping and multiple layers of authority that characterised the medieval system of political organisation. Ruggie argues, "The concept of sovereignty, then, represented merely the doctrinal counterpart of the application of single-point perspectival forms to the spatial organization of politics" (1998a:186).

Following this line of thinking, the principle of reciprocal sovereignty and the question of who would be designated as a power was not necessarily dependent on

how much power that political unit had, but rather on the collective act of mutual recognition (1998a:188). Similarly, on a national level, the success of those vying for power was also largely dependent on whether the purposes for which they were using power were regarded as socially legitimate by their subjects (1998a:187). The issue of ideational causation requires closer attention. Ruggie notes that "Some ideational factors simply do not function causally in the same way as brute facts or the agentive role that neo-utilitarianism attributes to interests. As a result, the efficacy of such ideational factors is easily underestimated" (1998b:869).

Relatedly, in an earlier article, Ruggie refers to Kratochwil's (1989:22-28) distinction between three worlds of social facticity in the international system, namely: the world of brute facts (material capabilities), the world of intentionality and meaning, and that of institutional facts. The latter two - the first referring to intentions, beliefs, desire, etc, and the second to constitutive and regulative rules - cannot be reduced to physical factors, and emphasise the role of human agency (1998a:90). He uses Searle's examples of traffic regulations versus the rules of chess to highlight the difference between regulative rules, which "...are intended to have causal effects..." and "...regulate an antecedently existing activity..." and constitutive rules, which "defined the set of practices that make up a particular class of consciously organized social activity" (1998b:871).

Consequently, he criticises the 'neo-utilitarian approaches' (neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism) for their lack of conception of constitutive rules. He highlights how this impacts on their contribution to the study of international relations, in that they are "...capable of explaining the origins of virtually nothing that is constitutive of the very possibility of international relations: not territorial states, not systems of states, not any concrete international order, nor the whole host of institutional forms that states use...All are assumed to exist already" (1998b:871). It follows that, given the absence of an understanding of constitutive rules in the mainstream approaches, they are also unable to conceive of, not to mention explain, global political transformation. Ruggie will have us believe that it is often changes in the constitutive rules that govern the international system that bring about change – as was the case with the abolition of slavery, and collapse of the Soviet empire (1998b:873-874).

Based on these suppositions, he emphasises the need to problematise the ideas and interests of states, rather than accept them as given. Finding answers to how these identities and interests were created ultimately allows us to explain or predict how they might change. He uses the examples of pre- versus post-war Germany and Japan to illustrate how it is possible for state identities to change (from militarist to non-militarist states) and how this influences their interests, and their behaviour in the international system (1998b:863).

Ruggie also uses the case of the United States to highlight the complex interplay between ideational and material factors. He claims that the concept of 'exceptionalism' has always been an important part of the United States' definition of its interests and role in the world, and has influenced the type of foreign policy that the US has pursued (1998a:200). He argues that US policymakers have often acted on the basis of ideational considerations, and provides evidence to counter the argument that in many cases, this is merely the "...cloaking of 'given' material interests in rhetorical garb..." (1998a:201). The conclusion is therefore that "...the interaction of ideational factors and material interests [in the history of USFP] was highly complex: ideas not only shaped how interests were pursued, but in some cases helped define the interests the United States subsequently did pursue" (1998a:225).

Ruggie also applies this thinking to his earlier work on regime change (1998a: 62-84, first published in 1982), where he makes the assumption that international regimes do not merely reflect existing power relations between states, as realists would have us believe, but are instead a combination of both power and what he calls "legitimate social purpose". In other words, intersubjective understandings of what constitutes global social objectives play an important part in regime creation and change. While hegemonic stability theory allows for only one source of regime change, namely changes in material capabilities, Ruggie argues that we need to make provision for sources of regime change other than the rise or decline of economic hegemons. To this end, he advances the idea of social purpose as one such source. If one assumes that it is possible for a situation to arise where power and purpose do not necessarily covary, we end up with two, instead of one, potential sources of change. This leads to the possibility that, even in the absence of a hegemon, there might still be "a congruence of social purpose among the leading economic powers..." (1998a:65).

Following this line of argumentation, he then contends that a decline of US hegemony need not lead to the collapse of regimes that have come to characterise the current world order. If we believe that such regimes are more than a reflection of the distribution of power, then a change in power relations would not necessarily undermine the existing shared purposes. This would be an instance of norm-governed change, in other words change within an existing normative framework rather than more fundamental norm-transforming change. Subsequently, however, Ruggie became more interested in fundamental norm-transforming change.

This leads us to the question of what process, occurrence, or development would, in Ruggie's view, bring about a fundamental transformation of the current global political system?

3.5   Transformation and the "unbundling" of territoriality

For Ruggie, such a transformation would entail that the particular form of organising political space – in the current system, mutually exclusive sovereign states, or the concept of territoriality – "...is fundamentally modified or has lost its efficacy" (1998a:172). He attempts to explore the possibilities of such a fundamental transformation by examining the emergence of the current system of territoriality. His hypothesis is that a transformation in this sphere of the international system would lead to a transformation of the system as a whole.

As already mentioned, although he notes the important role that material forces played in this transformation, he emphasises that particular attention needs to be paid to ideational factors, as "elements of social epistemology also played a critical role in delegitimating medieval practices and institutions and in imagining successor forms". He singles out a change in prevailing conceptions of spatial differentiation - namely the shift to a single point perspective - as being one of the main factors which had an impact on virtually all aspects of social life (1998a:172). The role of society's ability to *imagine* new forms of political organisation is thus an important factor enabling change.

Few IR scholars have considered the role that changes in seemingly unrelated fields such as the visual arts have had or can have on changes in the international system. Ruggie's observation might thus seem quite foreign to the discipline of international relations, but it should not be dismissed on those grounds for the potential implications for future transformation of the international system are profound.

Based on the role that the development of the single-point perspective had on the creation of the state system, Ruggie argues that a key indicator of a transformation of the current international system would be "the emergence of multi-perspectival political practices and doctrines for the governance of [political spaces]" (1998a:172) and that this provides us with an instrument through which to view potential occurrences of international transformation, including increasingly integrated global economic relations.

Related to this is the idea of "unbundling of territoriality" as a possible source of transformation. This harks back to when, after having established sovereign, mutually exclusive political units, states found themselves unable to deal with problems that require transterritorial solutions. According to Ruggie, "What we might describe as an "unbundling" of territoriality, then, of which extraterritoriality was the first and most enduring instantiation, over time has become a generic contrivance used by states to attenuate the paradox of absolute individuation" (1998a:190). Ruggie refers to the existence of numerous international regimes, institutions of economic integration, and political communities as indications of the way in which territoriality has become unbundled. He argues that this is where we should start looking if we want to explore the potential sources of current and future transformation of the international system. Because these institutional initiatives have been the means by which states have attempted to "...compensate for the "social defects" that inhere in the modern construct of territoriality..." the area of unbundled territory is "the place wherein any rearticulation of international political space would be occurring today" (1998a:195). Ruggie suggests that the European Union (EU) might be an example of the effects of an unbundling of territoriality, and may represent a postmodern form of political organisation, or a "multiperspectival polity".

3.6   Normative implications of change

A final question which needs to be addressed relates to Ruggie's contribution to the normative implications of transformation of the international system. Griffith (1999:196) claims that Ruggie's work has always had an underlying normative element.   According to him, Ruggie exhibits not only a theoretical concern with fundamental transformation, but also with "...how the international system can cope without change bringing in its wake disorder and chaos". Exploring the normative implications of a constructivist approach, in challenging mainstream positivist approaches, provides a starting point. Given positivist approaches such as neorealism's depiction of the international system as essentially unchanging – and by implication also unchangeable – realists argue that "...International Relations theory can never be a theory of the 'good life', but only a theory of 'survival'" (Neufeld, 1995:90).   This results in a perpetuation of existing patterns of inequality and dependence which exist in the international system. If, however, like Ruggie, one adopts a constructivist view of the international system, progressive change becomes possible, even though constructivism does not assume that change necessarily equals progress. The current system is, after all, a social construction, based on social practices. It follows, then, that by changing social practices, one can also change the current world order. In conclusion, Ruggie's constructivist approach thus enables one to conceive of emancipatory transformation of the international system, although this is not something he explores explicitly.

3.7   Summation

From the above overview of John Gerard Ruggie's contribution to the study of change in international relations, a focus on the social construction of the international system emerged as a characteristic of his approach. This also extends to his conceptualisation of the structure of the international system, in that he assumes the building blocks of international reality to be ideational as well as material. To this end, in exploring the factors that played a role in the emergence of the modern system of states, Ruggie identifies both material factors and changes in 'social epistemology', claiming that ideational factors were instrumental in determining the *type* of social arrangement that emerged.

It was found that, according to Ruggie, an important dimension of change is absent from Waltz's theory of international politics as a result of the fact that he eliminates the differentiation of units as an analytical component of political structure. Instead, Ruggie argues that systemic change is possible if one makes distinctions in terms of how the units are constituted.

This chapter also outlined the features of an interpretive approach, which Ruggie subscribes to, and specifically the relevance of the notion of intersubjectivity. Ruggie contends that by exploring the intersubjective nature of certain accepted norms in international relations, such as sovereignty, the possibilities of understanding how collective intentionality can bring about change in the system are opened up. It follows that it is often changes in the constitutive rules that govern the international system that bring about change.

For Ruggie, a fundamental transformation of the international system would involve a change in the form of organising political space, in other words from the current state system to a different one. In this regard, he refers to the idea of "unbundling of territoriality" as a possible source of transformation, pointing to the changing characteristics of the international system - for example, the increase in international regimes - as indicators of the way in which territoriality has become unbundled.

This leads us to the next chapter, in which the work of the third selected scholar, Robert W. Cox, will come under scrutiny. Cox, who starts from a political economy perspective, would at first appear to differ quite significantly from the two authors already discussed. Consequently, his work makes important contributions in areas where the two constructivists are found lacking. Interestingly, however, there are also significant areas of overlap between all three, which will be highlighted in the final two chapters.

CHAPTER 4

Robert W. Cox: "a fugitive from intellectual camps of victory" [1]

4.1   Introduction

Even more so than can be said of the two authors already examined, change is a central feature of Robert W. Cox's understanding of international relations. According to him, one of the main objectives of his research is to answer the question "whether the present age is one of those historical breaking points between world-order structures, whether the present world situation contains the developmental potential of a different world order". In order to do this, he employs an historical approach, on the basis that an understanding of how world orders were created and transformed in the past can provide us with some pointers regarding our current situation.

Furthermore, he adopts a political economy orientation to understanding change, arguing that an analysis of world politics should not be limited to an analysis of inter-state relations and the anarchy problematique. Instead, it should include the world economy and issues of production in order to encompass the full range of power relations that shape world politics. However, while Cox criticises the neorealist focus on states and their self-interested behaviour, he is similarly critical of Marxism's emphasis on production and class relations. Cox feels that neglecting either economic or political relations leads to a diminished understanding of how the world works. Instead, he proposes an approach that combines the two into a single theoretical perspective.

He is also concerned with the *process* of change, asking the question, "What social and political forces would have to be mobilized in order to bring about one or another

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[1] Strange (1988:269-270).

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feasible outcome? (Cox, 1996:54-55). But initially Cox begins with the assumption that, in order to change the world, we must start by exploring and understanding the world.

It is contended that Cox's contributions must not be evaluated as a *theory* of International Relations. Instead, Cox's remark that "Gramsci was not concerned as an abstract theorist with building a system of political analysis that would stand the test of time. He was concerned with changing his world" (Cox, 1999:4) is just as applicable to himself. Furthermore, although Cox's work spans some decades and has been published and republished in numerous forms, I have used - where available - the versions in the 1996 reader consisting of his most important work, compiled by himself and Timothy Sinclair. Consequently, even though the articles were first published much earlier – in fact, going back to 1953 – the year 1996 will be used in the referencing for convenience.

4.2   Coxian critical theory

The first important characteristic of Cox's theorising, which he places a considerable amount of emphasis on, is its grounding in critical philosophy. Cox is under no illusions regarding the possibility of practising neutral, value-free science, and is explicit in his criticism of the positivist "who draws a line between his science and another's ideology", stating, " I should make it clear that I do not draw such a line; I accept that my own thought is grounded in a particular perspective" (1996:56).

The comprehensive distinction he made between problem-solving and critical theory[2] in his 1981 critique of neorealism[3] was a watershed in his academic career, and summarised the critical stance he had developed since leaving his position at the

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[2] Some writers (notably Devetak, 1996) prefer to use the term 'critical international theory' when referring to the employment of a critical approach in the field of IR. Devetak holds that, although critical theory - meaning that theory which has its origin in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory - has not directly addressed the international level, this does not mean that international relations is beyond the limits of its concern (1996:147). The role of critical international theory is, therefore, to apply Frankfurt School Critical Theory beyond to the global realm.

[3] See Cox, R.W. (1981) "Social forces, states, and world orders: beyond international relations theory" in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, vol.10, no.2 (Summer): pp.126-155.

International Labour Organisation[4] to pursue academia. It requires detailed consideration, as Cox's preference for critical theory forms the basis for the development of his own unique approach. The underlying characteristic of problem solving theory is that it takes the current international system – including the existing power relationships - as given, and assumes that it is not subject to fundamental change. In other words, "the present order is equivalent to past and future orders. International relations is understood as a necessitous realm of recurrence and repetition" (Devetak, 1996:157). It follows, then, that its main objective is to address problems in the system in order to ensure its smooth functioning. Neorealism, as a problem-solving theory, has a stabilising effect in that it works within the confines of the existing system, taking current global social and political relations as given.

In contrast, critical theory[5] "steps outside the confines of the existing set of relationships to identify the origins and developmental potential of these phenomena" and their potential for change. It challenges the inequalities built into the prevailing world order, "allow[ing] for a normative choice" in favour of an alternative order (Cox, 1996:90). Approaches to thinking about future world orders that are derived from positivism - like neorealism - all share a common defect: the power relations are regarded as givens, and hence any future alternatives in which these power relations may change are ruled out from the start (Cox, 1996:76-77).

There is another important distinction between the two types of theorising that has important implications for the potential for change. Critical theory rejects the separation of subject and object, as advocated by positivist, problem-solving theory. By reconceptualising subjects (agents) as being an integral part of the object (the global system), it becomes possible to change the latter. Although critical theory thus clearly has a penchant for change, Cox draws attention to the fact that it should not be mistaken for a utopian, pie-in-the-sky kind of theory with no sense for what is practically possible. He notes that, whilst allowing for different political futures, "it limits the range of choice to alternative orders which are feasible transformations of

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[4] Cox spent almost a quarter of a century (1948-1972) working for the ILO. See Leysens (2002:100-127) for a biographical outline of Cox's time at the ILO, his early influences and the development of his thinking.

[5] See Cox (1996:97) for an outline of the basic premises of critical theory.

the existing world", due to the fact that "its utopianism is constrained by its comprehension of historical processes". In this way, critical theory rejects "improbable alternatives just as it rejects the permanency of the existing order" (Cox, 1996:90).

Lastly, he also draws a distinction between what could be termed the holism of critical theory versus the methodological individualism or reductionism of problem-solving theory. Stated simplistically, critical theory attempts to address the bigger picture, while problem-solving theory focuses on a distinct part of the complex whole. While both types of theorising start by focusing on an aspect of the social totality, critical theory does not stop there. Devetak (1996:156) explains critical theory's holistic methodology as comprising "a moment of abstraction, where a specific structure or object is temporarily lifted from its context in order to be studied in isolation, and a moment of reconstruction, where that which is abstracted is re-inserted into the whole...It is this reconstructive moment which methodologically distinguishes critical from traditional theories" (Devetak, 1996:156). Sinclair (1996:8) also identifies this two-phased approach in Cox's research. According to him, "the first moment is that of static or synchronic understanding. It has to do with contemplating the coherence of a social relationship within its own terms...The second [diachronic] moment involves understanding the developmental potential in a whole.

Relatedly, in order to focus on only one particular part, problem-solving theories focus on a distinct part of a complex whole, assuming stability in the other parts. This is the drawback of much IR theory – in trying to explain or understand the international system, theorists bracket off other parts of the social world (such as sub-state social forces), assuming them to be stable, which of course they are not. Given the potential impact that these neglected factors could have on change in the international system, one has to question how adequate theories are that proclaim to be systemic and hence focus only on the international or global level.

Though the differences between problem-solving and critical theory should be obvious, it is imperative to note that this does not mean they are mutually exclusive. In fact, according to Cox "The strength of the one is the weakness of the other"

(1996:89). They merely address different questions, and Cox argues that their respective relevance depends on the current historical conditions, in other words, that "[t]he perspectives of different historical periods favor one or the other kind of theory". In periods of stability, problem-solving theory is favoured, while critical theory is sought out in periods of turbulence and uncertainty (1996:90). Critical theory, by its nature and purpose, deals with a changing reality, and must therefore constantly adjust its concepts. Cox concedes that such a method appears to "lack the precision that can be achieved by problem-solving theory, which posits a fixed order as its point of reference". At the same time, however, the perceived relative strength of problem-solving theory can be shown to rest on a shaky assumption, since social reality is constantly changing. Additionally, Cox points out that "the assumption of fixity is not merely a convenience of method, but also an ideological bias" (1996:89).

Despite Cox's identification with a critical approach, Leysens (2002) argues that he should not be grouped with other IR scholars working in the Critical Theory tradition of the Frankfurt school – sometimes called the Critical Theory school of IR/IPE. Instead, he proposes that Cox should be labelled a "critical realist"[6] (2002:iii), following Falk (1997). Leysens contends that 'Coxian Critical Theory' is distinct from other IR critical theorists like Ashley, Linklater, Neufeld and Hoffmann on the grounds that Cox does not share their intellectual roots. While Cox draws mainly on Marx, Gramsci, Braudel and Vico, the others owe many of their assumptions to Habermas. One could, however, counter this argument by noting that the original

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[6] Falk (1997: 39-40) regards critical realists as falling within the broader domain of realism (which he interprets as a focus on power relations), but "committed to theorising in interpretative modes about interstate relations as a whole, premising their expectations about the future on an understanding of how current international society is evolving and what sorts of changes are likely to be both feasible and beneficial". Moreover, they are holists in that they disagree with neorealism that "the existing reality is comprehensible by reduction to the structure of interaction among the dominant units" (Falk, 1997:41). He identifies Carr, Bull and Cox as examples of critical realists. "The critical realist, with historical consciousness, is aware that the state and the state system have emerged, evolved, are resilient, are being superseded, and will continue to evolve in response to contradictory pressures" (Falk, 1997:45). Critical realism relies on "an interpretative presentation of reality rather than claiming to be scientific in a positivistic sense" (Falk, 1997:54). Cox also identifies himself with realism (see his 1997 edited version "The New Realism"), with the understanding that "Realists understand world politics as power relations" (Cox, 1997:xv). The concept affirms Cox's intellectual debt to the classical realism of E.H. Carr, and yet differs from it by broadening the range of determining forces beyond state power. Similarly, "It differs from neo-realism in its concern with structural change and in understanding this change in historical terms. The new realism develops the old realism, using its historical approach, so as to understand the realities of power in the present and emerging world" (Cox, 1997:xvi).

Frankfurt School theorists (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others) were heavily influenced by Marx. Additionally, Cox's distinction between problem-solving and critical theory is clearly based on the differentiation made by Horkheimer and Adorno in their landmark study entitled *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. It is, however, a valid observation that Cox does not explicitly cite any of the Frankfurt School theorists directly – except for one mention of Marcuse – in his work, while he refers to his other influences – Sorel, Braudel, Vico, Gramsci – on numerous occasions. An important difference between Cox and the other 'IR critical theorists' is, however, the fact that, despite his criticism of positivism, unlike them, Cox does not reject it altogether.

Furthermore, Leysens (2002:20) claims that one of the main differences between Cox and the Frankfurt School (and the IR scholars associated with it) is his focus on the importance of the state. While scholars like Linklater and Ashley advocate the demise of the state system, Cox does not see it as an obstacle to progressive global political transformation. Despite these differences, the argument here is that, just as Cox does not fit neatly into a Critical Theory category, one can similarly not ascribe all the characteristics that Falk associates with critical realists to him. For example, Falk (1997:45) claims that critical realists believe that changes in world order are "not a matter of normative preference, but of the evolutionary potentials associated with the exercise of power". It follows, then, that such a view is "at odds with values-driven or idealist orientations that believe in the potentially animating influence of ideas and ideals" (Falk, 1997:46). This view of change clearly does not apply to Cox, whose approach has an unmistakably emancipatory objective. Cox is explicit about the values underlying his work, claiming that his purpose is " to discover and encourage avenues of enquiry that might in the long run aid towards the transformation of power relations both within and among nations in the direction of greater social equity" (Cox, 1996:377).

The contention here is thus that, whether Cox is ascribed a "critical realist" or any other label, he remains a critical theorist, in terms of his strong identification with the emancipatory goals of critical theory, and his emphasis on an historical, interpretative orientation. Cox himself associates his Marxist and Gramscian roots with critical theory, maintaining that "Historical materialism is ... a foremost source of critical

theory" (1996:95). In the end, there are many more commonalties between Cox and the other scholars grouped under the CT school of IR/IPE heading, as well as the Frankfurt School[7], than there are differences. After all, if critical theory is about any one thing, it is about a normative commitment to emancipation rather than a commitment to a particular metatheory. If one were to only group scholars together who share *all* assumptions, theoretical aims, ontological and epistemological positions, methodologies and intellectual roots, every IR scholar would end up in his or her own category! Admittedly, some categorisations have become meaningless catch-all terms – such as the tendency to label anyone vaguely interested in the social construction of or role of ideas in the world as a constructivist. However, grouping particular scholars together - such as those working within a critical perspective, does have its academic value.

4.3   Historicising transformation

As Devetak (1996:151) notes, "Critical theory views the prevailing order of social and political relations as a historical production which must be explained". Cox's preference for critical theory thus underlines the importance he places on an historical approach. In contrast to the non- or ahistorical approach preferred by problem-solving theory, Cox starts from the premise that theory is always situated in a particular time and place. A focus on history (his formal academic training was in the field of history) thus forms a particularly important part of his unique approach. Nevertheless, like Wendt, he draws on a number of diverse intellectual traditions in constructing a method. His justification is, "To reason about possible future world orders now ... requires a broadening of our enquiry beyond conventional international relations, so as to encompass basic processes at work in the development of social forces and forms of state, and in the structure of global political economy" (Cox, 1996:90-91).

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[7] Cox shares with the Frankfurt School "a concern to comprehend the central features of contemporary society by understanding its historical and social development, and tracing contradictions in the present which may open up the possibility of transcending contemporary society and its built-in pathologies and forms of domination" (Devetak, 1996:145-146).

Given his advocation of a multidisciplinary approach, however, his work remains strongly historical. And yet Sinclair (1996:14) is correct in emphasising that his approach "is not a mere retreat to history or thick description". One of the obvious reasons for an historical approach to structural change is that an understanding of the sources of conflict inherent in existing structures can be aided by an understanding of how structural transformations have come about in the past (Cox, 1996:54). Knowledge of history can "become a guide for action. History thus generates theory" (1996:146). But Cox also has other motivations.

Given the dangers of critical theory's normative interests being idealistic and utopian, a thorough comprehension of historical processes and the origins of the present order enables theorists to develop realistic accounts of transformational possibilities. Furthermore, he describes the "error of neorealism", which is of course grounded in positivism, as "taking a form of thought derived from a particular phase of history (and thus from a particular structure of social relations) and assuming it to be universally valid" (1996:94). He thus rejects positivism, and with it neorealism, on the grounds that it cannot account for fundamental, structural change, as in trying to find universalist laws to explain social relations it cannot allow for significant divergences. Consequently, Cox laments the neorealist assumption that a balance-of-power system is the universal condition. He argues that all that can be inferred from history is that there have been other periods in which structures similar to the current state system existed. Furthermore, neorealists fail to consider the fact that "there have likewise been otherwise-constituted historical structures of which the medieval order of European Christendom was one" (Cox, 1996:54). On this account, Cox also rejects Marx's claim to have discovered a "logic" in history (Mittelman, 1997:259).

Instead, he advocates an historicist epistemology, which is framed in contrast to positivism. "For historicism, both human nature and the structures of human interaction change, if only very slowly. History is the process of their changing. One cannot therefore speak of "laws" in any general sense transcending historical eras, nor of structures as outside of or prior to history. Regularities in human activities may indeed be observed within particular eras, and thus the positivist approach can be fruitful within defined historical limits, though not with the universal pretensions to which it aspires. The research program of historicism is to reveal the historical

structures characteristic of particular eras within which such regularities prevail. Even more important, this research program is to explain transformations from one structure to another" (Cox, 1996:53). Consequently, an historicist approach does not attempt to find universal laws and generalisations, but is instead consciously constrained by time and space, which limits its explanatory power.

It is through the work of the social theorist Vico that Cox comes to the conclusion that an historicist approach is the one best suited to studying historical structures and structural change. Vico argues that social practices are constantly changing and human nature is not fixed. Hence the problem with the positivist aim of coming up with universal laws of social relations that are applicable across time and space. And yet he admits that it is possible to identify certain concepts that refer to commonalties between different periods, which enables history to be intelligible. "All peoples, according to Vico, have confronted similar problems in the course of their development. It should therefore be possible to derive concepts that help explain events occurring in the distinct histories of different peoples. The study of specific events is to be joined to ideas that make possible comparisons or generalizations about social change – the possibility of what we call social science" (Cox, 1996:29).

Another great influence on Cox's historicist approach is, of course, the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci[8], to whom he was first introduced in 1972 by one of his graduate students at the University of Toronto. Cox maintains that Gramsci derived all his concepts - many of which Cox has adopted - from history, and that he was constantly adjusting them to particular historical situations. "A concept, in Gramsci's thought, is loose and elastic and attains precision only when brought into contact with a particular situation which it helps to explain, a contact which also develops the meaning of the concept. This is the strength of Gramsci's historicism and therein lies its explanatory power" (1996:125). Drawing on both Gramsci and Marx's idea of the historical specificity of the capitalist market (i.e. the idea that it is transient rather than a natural or inevitable occurrence), Cox applies it to the

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[8] For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on Cox's interpretation and application of Gramsci. No attempt will be made to assess Cox's understanding of Gramsci. For a critical evaluation of Cox and other new Gramscians' application of Gramsci's ideas to IR, see Germain and Kenny (1998). They raise doubts about, amongst others, whether Gramsci's concepts can unproblematically be 'internationalised.

international state system, noting that the state system is a characteristic of a particular historical era, and therefore open to change.

Finally, in line with a critical approach, historicism does not disguise "but rather explicitly affirms the dialectical relationship of subject and object in historical process...Where positivism separates the observing subject from the observed object of enquiry, this other historically oriented, interpretative, or hermeneutic epistemology sees subject and object in the historical world as a reciprocally interrelated whole" (Cox, 1996:147). According to Cox (1996:28) he took his cue from the historians Sorel and Collingwood in using the relationship between the material world, and the subjective experience and interpretation of this world by people as a "guideline" for his "reflections upon social and political change". One can thus identify an element of hermeneutical awareness – the involvement of the actors and their experiences in understanding the world – in Cox's work. The implication is that an objective understanding is not possible, which means that positivism's separation between subject and object is rejected.

4.4   Questions of ontology

As is the case for Wendt and Ruggie, the issue of ontology is privileged by Cox. For him, "Ontology lies at the beginning of any enquiry. We cannot define a problem in global politics without presupposing a certain basic structure consisting of the significant kinds of entities involved and the form of significant relationships among them" (1996:144). Questions of ontology are also of particular significance for the study of structural change as "A shift of ontologies is inherent in the very process of historical structural change" (Cox, 1996:147).

So, according to Cox, what is the "stuff" which constitutes reality, and what should IR theorists focus on in their endeavour to make sense of the social world? For Cox, an important component of the world is what he calls 'historical structures'. It is a concept sourced from the historian Fernand Braudel, and refers to "persistent patterns of human activity and thought that endure for relatively long periods of time". Furthermore, historical structures "are the result of collective responses to certain common problems – whether these relate to the satisfaction of material wants

(economics), the organization of cooperation and security (politics), or the explanation of the human condition and purpose (religion and ideology) – which become congealed in practices, institutions, and intersubjective meanings for a significant group of people" (1996:514). In contrast with the positivism of neo-realism, Cox thus adopts a more intersubjective approach to social structures: "Although structures, as intersubjective products, do not have a physical existence like tables or chairs, they nevertheless have real, concrete effects" (Devetak, 1996:158). This view has similarities with Wendt's scientific realist approach.

As to the constitution of historical structures, Cox contends that one can identify three categories of forces that interact in a structure: material capabilities[9], ideas[10], and institutions. The latter are amalgams of the other two, and are means of stabilising a particular order. These forces can be seen to interact at three different levels or spheres of activity or human organisation[11]: social relations of production[12], forms of state, and at the world order or global system level[13]. These different spheres and levels allow Cox to develop a multi-tiered explanatory framework. Cox, like Wendt, thus has a pluralist dynamic conception of structure. Like Wendt, Cox's structure also has an ideational component, in contrast to the purely materialist neorealist conception of structure. While Wendt, however, distinguishes between two (micro and macro) levels of structure, Cox sees structures as interacting at three different levels. Cox's approach also differs from the neorealist structuralist account of the

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[9] Material capabilities consist of dynamic productive capabilities (such as technology) and accumulated resources (Sinclair, 1996:10).

[10] Cox distinguishes between at least two kinds of ideas: The first are intersubjective meanings, or shared notions of the nature of social relations. He cites states as examples of intersubjective meanings in contemporary world politics. The other kind are "collective images of social order held by different groups of people". These differ regarding the nature and the legitimacy of existing power relations, the meaning of public goods, etc. It follows that "Whereas intersubjective meanings are broadly common throughout a particular historical structure and constitute the common ground of social discourse (including conflict), collective images may be several and opposed" (1996:99).

[11] See Bieler and Morton (2004a:89) for a detailed description of the characteristics of each sphere.

[12] Modes of social relations of production are concrete historical forms in into which production has been organised. They reflect power relations between dominant and subordinate classes that emanate from production. See Cox (1987) where he identifies twelve modes, based on the interaction of three dimensions (objective factors, subjective factors, and institutional factors).

[13] Cox borrowed the notion of the interactive, mutual influence between production processes, forms of state and changes at the global level from E.H. Carr.

effects of structure on agency. Instead, Cox places a considerable amount of emphasis on the important role played by agency.

It should be noted here that although "Production creates the material basis for all forms of social existence, and the ways in which human efforts are combined in productive processes affect all other aspects of life, including the polity" (Cox, 1987:1), it is understood in a broad rather than a purely economistic sense. It includes the production and reproduction of knowledge, ideas, intersubjective meanings, of norms, institutions and social practices. For Cox, "Looking at production is simply a way of thinking about collective life, not a reference to the "economic" sectors of human activity" (Sinclair, 1996:9). This wider understanding of production means that social relations of production are not reduced to material factors. This brings us to Cox's position in the idealism-materialism debate.

For Cox, reality "is not only the physical environment of human action but also the institutional, moral and ideological context that shapes thoughts and actions" (1997:252). He regards the relationship between idealism and materialism as being a dialectical, reciprocal one. According to him "They are two necessary and complementary ways to approach reality" (1996:28). Furthermore, in order to understand the current global system, one must take into account the "historically changing interaction between ideas, consciousness, ideologies and analytical concepts on the one hand, and concrete social, economic, and political circumstances on the other" (Devetak, 1996:151).

Cox's historicist approach also influences his view on the idealist-materialist debate in that he holds that one cannot generalise about the relative importance of material forces versus ideational factors over time. One can, however, determine that in a particular historical period one or the other was more instrumental in bringing about change, for example. The debate thus needs to be approached on a historical case study basis.

Although strongly influenced by Marx, who emphasised the role of material forces, arguing that ideas are secondary to material production[14], Cox thus takes a much more middle-of-the-road approach to the role of ideas versus material forces. For him, structure has a strongly ideational component: "Historical structures...mean persistent social practices, made by collective human activity and transformed through collective human activity" (Cox, 1987:4). In fact, in a statement which could have been written by a constructivist, Cox admits, "Structures are socially constructed, i.e., they become parts of the objective world by virtue of their existence in the intersubjectivity of relevant groups of people" (1996:149). He also emphasises the role of ideational factors in the process of change, contending, "How this objective world is made and remade through changes in intersubjectivity is the principal question to be answered in any attempt to understand the process of historical change". Hence, "An alternative future world order implies a new intersubjective understanding of the nature of the world order and its basic entities and relationships" (1996:310).

At other times, however, he places emphasis on the priority of material factors. In discussing the rise of new social movements in response to globalisation, for example, he notes that they have converged around specific issues and identities, but that, ultimately, "There is a material basis for their protest, a material basis that is broader than the particular identities affirmed" (1996:307).

Traditional Marxists are of course critical of Cox's middle ground approach to ideas and material factors. Burnham (1991:77), for example, criticises what he calls Cox's "frantic attempt to escape the twin evils of 'economism' and idealism", namely the view that the interaction between material capabilities, ideas and institutions is a reciprocal one, and that no determinism exists. He argues that, by allocating equal weight to each variable, he fails to recognise the fact that "capital as a social relation transforms the social order in such a way that all relations are subsumed under the capital relation".

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[14] "To undermine Hegels' idealism, Marx insisted ... on the primacy of 'the labour premise'. That is, before mankind can think and before ideas can be made, man must be fed, clothed and sheltered. In order to do this, mankind must be employed. Thus the employment of labour is the first and most important fact of history, while ideas are secondary" (Hobson, 2000:112).

In summary, one could argue that, following Gramsci, Cox ultimately privileges material factors, but at the same time believes that ideational factors cannot be dismissed, and need to be taken seriously. Cox cannot therefore be criticised for economic reductionism, or reductionism to production. Similarly, Cox's defence of Gramsci can also be applied in defence of himself: "The juxtaposition and reciprocal relationships of the political, ethical, and ideological spheres of activity with the economic sphere [in Gramsci's work] avoid reductionism ... In Gramsci's historical materialism...ideas and material conditions are always bound together, mutually influencing one another, and not reducible to one another. Ideas have to be understood in relation to material circumstances. Material circumstances include both the social relations and the physical means of production" (1996:131-132).

Cox thus sees his historicist approach as being able to, in a certain sense, bridge the gap between materialism and idealism, on the basis that one of its aims is "to find the connections between the mental schemes through which people conceive action and the material world which constrains both what people can do and how they think about doing it" (Cox, 1996:52).

4.5   Hegemony and the power of ideas

An important concept in Cox's work, and one which sheds more light on his perception of the idealism-materialism debate, is that of hegemony. Given the prominence of the term in his work, it is important to explore its meaning and relevance in some detail. His employment of the concept also has important implications for the study of global transformation. Cox's conceptualisation of hegemony differs from the meaning attributed to it in neorealist discourse, where the term is reduced to dominance based on a state's military and economic (i.e., material) capabilities. The Gramscian understanding of the term, which Cox uses and applies to the international system, has an added intersubjective, ideational element. In other words, a consensual element is added, with a dominant power making certain compromises "to secure the acquiescence of lesser powers to an order that can be expressed in terms of a general interest" (1996:55-56). Hegemony in this sense is thus "an expression of broadly based consent, manifested in the acceptance of ideas and supported by material resources and institutions" (Bieler and Morton, 2004a:87).

The Machiavellian metaphor of power as a centaur (half man and half beast, in other words, a combination of consent and coercion) is instrumental to Gramsci and Cox's conception of hegemony. Cox illustrates it in the following manner: "To the extent that the consensual aspect of power is in the forefront, hegemony prevails. Coercion is always latent but is only applied in marginal, deviant cases. Hegemony is enough to ensure conformity of behaviour in most people most of the time" (1996:127).

Through his Gramscian understanding of the concept hegemony, Cox brings an important component to the idealism-materialism debate, namely the interplay between power and ideas. He notes how a political economy perspective is useful to view the world as "a pattern of interacting social forces in which states play an intermediate though autonomous role between the global structure of social forces and local configurations of social forces within particular countries". Power is thus understood as "*emerging* from social processes rather than taken as given in the form of accumulated material capabilities" (1996:105). From this point of view, the power of ideology – the power that transforms particular global structures into the "necessary order of nature" – is just as important as material power (George, 1994:178). Leysens confirms this, noting, "Crucially, for Cox, ideas always evolve within a particular historical context and it is essential to ask where a particular idea … came from and in whose interest the institutionalisation of such an idea is/was" (2002:122).

This opens up a Pandora's box of ideas as instruments used to legitimise a particular worldview. It becomes important to ask whose ideas are being legitimised, for what purpose, and who is benefiting (and at what cost) from the advocation of a particular set of ideas. According to Bieler, Gramsci's idea of 'organic intellectuals'[15], which is also adopted by Cox, adds to an understanding of the power of ideas. 'Organic intellectuals' play a crucial role in achieving hegemony and establishing a new order. They do not simply produce ideas, but it is their task to develop a hegemonic project,

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[15] Note that, in Gramsci's view, not every intellectual is an organic intellectual. He distinguishes the latter from the traditional type of intellectual, who thinks of himself as independent and autonomous. Instead, organic intellectuals are regarded as "the true representatives of a particular social groups, generated by the sphere of production…Only intellectuals of this type are able to engage in the construction of a hegemonic project. Being firmly related to the material structure, they are able to give their ideas relevance in the formation of a historical bloc and the establishment of a new order" (Bieler, 2001:99).

which is able to transcend the particular interests of their own social group and bring the interests of the leading class into harmony with those of subordinate classes (Bieler, 2001:97 and Cox, 1996:133). The emergence of a new historic bloc or world order thus comes about as the result of "the articulation of persuasive ideas and arguments" (Burnham, 1991:76).

This is, arguably, where the greatest value of the neo-Gramscian, and particularly the Coxian, approach can be found. Gill and Law (in Burnham, 1991:76) assert that, while the neo-Gramscian analysis of material power is very similar to its neorealist counterpart, the approach distinguishes itself by its ability to understand global structural transformation by means of the interplay of material and normative (ethical and ideological) factors.

4.6   Pushing the boundaries of state-centric theorising

Next, we turn to Cox's stance with regard to the state-centric analysis common to mainstream IR, and its implications for global political transformation. Cox challenges the neorealist assumption that states are the major actors in international relations when he writes, "The old Westphalian concept of a system of sovereign states is no longer an adequate way of conceptualizing world politics" (1996:305-306). Cox's view is that any IR theory aimed at explaining global transformation should not be restricted to an analysis of relations between states, but should broaden its scope to include any number of actors and processes that may have an impact on transformation. After all, how is one to conceive of alternative world orders if one is limited to working within an existing one? As noted above, in Cox's conceptual framework, the state is regarded as only one force shaping international relations. For a comprehensive understanding of the current global system and its transformation, the interaction between social forces, states, and world orders must be taken into account.

Whilst acknowledging the role of non-state actors and the changing role of the state, he is not suggesting that we are witnessing the demise of the state. He argues that a rise in interdependency does not necessarily imply a decline in territoriality, even though he admits that the importance of territoriality has declined in relation to non-

territorial power (1996:153-154). Instead, he contends that "the notion of a reciprocal interactive relationship of the two principles is closer to reality" (1996:308). So, apparently paradoxically, Cox argues that it is "all the more important to give attention to the nature of the state if it is to be assumed that the role of the state and its relationship to non-state forces may be in process of significant change" (1996:153).

Much of Cox's work is centred on the way in which globalisation has altered the relationship between states and the global economy. In particular, he emphasises what he calls the "internationalisation" of the state, referring to the state's new role in adjusting, instead of protecting, the domestic economy to the "perceived exigencies" of the world economy (Cox, 1996:154). In the light of the changing nature of states, Cox argues, "it is increasingly meaningless to speak of "the" state as do neorealists ... It becomes more useful to think in terms of *forms* of state – different forms which condition the ways in which different societies link into the global political economy" (1996:154, emphasis in original).

Cox thus views the state and its functions and roles as being, to a certain extent, socially and historically determined. States are seen as taking different forms, not only in different historical periods, but also in the same period, in order to adapt to the prevailing circumstances. The aim is thus "to historicize the state and to locate it in the full array of social relations rather than reify it as a singular entity unrelated to the changing nature of social forces". Similarly, Cox also adopts Gramsci's enlarged notion of the state to include not only the administrative, executive and coercive apparatuses of government, but also the "political underpinnings of the political structure in civil society" (1996:126). At the same time, however, Cox does not advocate an exclusively functionalist determinist account of the state. As mentioned earlier, forces of production, forms of state, and world orders are regarded as being interdependent phenomena. In other words, while changes in world order can result in changes (in the form of adaptations) in states, similarly changes in state forms can result in changes in world order. It should also be pointed out that, in responding to the challenges of globalisation, states often act proactively. If one takes the example of competition states, one could argue that states are in fact reinforcing and even exacerbating the process of globalisation in an attempt to maximise relative gains.

The relevance of this 'unpacking' of the state for understanding transformation is that, "In focusing on the transformations in forms of state that bring about changes in production relations, we are led to discover the relationships between changes in forms of state and changes in the structures of world order". He therefore sees a relationship between the two, claiming that "the emergence of new forms of state is associated with changes in the structures of world order and that these parallel changes have been mutually reinforcing" (Cox, 1987:108).

4.7   Mechanisms of transformation

Having explored the foundations of Cox's theoretical framework, we can now turn to the issue at hand: fundamental global transformation. Transformation, for Cox, can be either of a material or an ideational nature. Historical structures are "transformed when material circumstances have changed or prevailing meanings and purposes have been challenged by new practices" (Cox, 1996:514).

Cox agrees with most IR scholars that the transformation from the medieval and modern world orders constituted a definite breaking point. In trying to find an answer to whether there have been other breaking points since, however, he adopts a more political-economic perspective, asserting that "There have been important qualitative and structural differences between successive world orders in the modern era. It is a misleading oversimplification to regard all interstate systems as essentially the same insofar as they all lack a supreme world authority. The qualitative differences between world orders touch the nature and incidence of wars, the manner of resolving disputes, and the creation and distribution of wealth and poverty. These differences between one structure of world order and its successor are shaped by the forms of state and of production, and stabilized structures of world order in turn provide a framework conducive to certain forms of state and of production" (Cox, 1987:7). He goes on to identify four different world orders: a mercantilist, liberal (pax britannica), neoimperialist, and neoliberal (pax americana) order, and in later work adds the era of globalisation, but emphasises that such a periodising is nothing more than "an intellectual construct" (Cox, 1996:55).

Whether the end of the Cold War signified an epochal break or fundamental transformation of the international system has been an issue of intense debate amongst IR scholars. Cox adds a new dimension to the debate: interestingly, he does not regard the Cold War as having come to an end. Instead, he claims that there has been a change in the *nature* of the Cold War. While the Cold War between the USSR and the USA has ended, "there is a substantive meaning to the Cold War which has to do with the construction and maintenance of a set of structures – the national security state, the ideology of national security itself, intelligence and surveillance systems, and the co-optation of the political leadership of subordinate states, amongst other things. These structures remain in place..." (Sinclair, 1996:4).

In finding explanations for change, Cox is also heavily influenced by Karl Polanyi[16], who developed his 'double movement' model to explain the social and political effects of the industrial revolution. The first movement was the disembedding of the economy from society in the form of the self-regulating market. The second was society's response to its harmful effects, namely an attempt to reintegrate the economy and society. Cox argues that Polanyi's double movement model can be applied to understand change in the current global political economy. According to him, the trend of hyperliberalism which we are currently witnessing replicates the first phase of the double movement, and that there are signs of an approaching second phase of the double movement, in response to the inequalities resulting from the hyperliberal ideology (1996:32).

Cox's historicist-dialectical model of thought focuses on the role of power. It views transformation as the "result of conflicts, in which the emergence of a new form of consciousness leads to a shift in power relations" (Cox, 1996:77). It follows that, while neorealists like Waltz have a pessimistic view of conflict as "a recurrent consequence of a continuing structure", Cox sees it in a more positive light as "a possible cause of structural change" (Cox, 1996:95). He thus subscribes to the dialectical approach to the understanding of change as expressed by Ralf Dahrendorf, as "The idea of a society which produces in its structure the antagonisms that lead to

[16] Polanyi, K. (1944) *The Great Transformation*. Boston: Peacock Press.

its modification appears as an appropriate model for the analysis of change in general" (1996:514).

In Cox's historical materialist approach the concept of dialectic is used at two levels: the level of logic and the level of real history. At the level of logic, it refers to the conflict between concepts with the reality they are supposed to represent, in other words, the tension between a widely held conception of the world and the starkly different reality that exists for some people. According to Cox these tensions harbour latent conflict, in that each assertion about reality implicitly contains its opposite. "Where there appears to be a disjuncture between problems and hitherto-accepted mental constructs, we may detect the opening of a crisis of structural transformation. Thus some of us think the erstwhile-dominant mental model construct of neorealism is inadequate to confront the challenges of global politics today, while others, of course, think it still works" (Cox, 1996:150). At the level of real history, dialectic is "the potential for alternative forms of development arising from the confrontation of opposed social forces in any concrete historical situation (Cox, 1996:95). Cox's dialectical method also draws on Marx, who used it to distinguish between appearances and material reality. As Hobson (2000:110) notes, "Marx argues that we are confronted with, or bedazzled by, a world that *appears* extremely complex. The trick is to trace or reveal the essence that underlies this complexity".

Having established that Cox prefers a dialectical approach to understanding change, let us now turn to how he sees the *process* of change – including whether it is structure or agent-driven. Cox's view of the agent-structure dilemma is that it is "a chicken-and-egg proposition" (1996:494). Historical structures are seen as constituting a set of pressures and constraints within which human action (agency) can take place. Consequently, individuals have the option of accepting these constraints and acting within them, or resisting them. In order to successfully resist an existing historical structure, actors need to configure an alternative, rival structure (1996:98). Despite the existing constraints, therefore, agents are able to change structures through their actions. This is where the explanatory potential in Cox's approach is located.

As mentioned earlier, Cox views historical structures as consisting of three categories of forces (ideas, material capabilities and institutions). Furthermore, he sees these forces as interacting at three broad levels or spheres of activity that constitute the social world. These are social forces[17], forms of state and world order. Even though these three levels are conceptually distinct, they are interrelated in practice, with, for example, productive processes affecting all aspects of social life (1996:210). Similarly, while changes in production can generate new social forces, social forces can effect changes in the structure of states. Finally, changes in the structure of states can lead to changes in world order.

Cox provides an historical example which illustrates this process, noting how the changes in the social forces of production (the incorporation of the industrial workers) resulted in changes in the forms of state in the western world (towards economic nationalism and imperialism), and eventually brought about a fragmentation of the world economy and a more conflictual world order (Cox, 1996:101 and 210)[18]. While this may appear to suggest only a bottom-up process of change, Cox asserts that the relationship between the three levels is not unilinear. The order can also be reversed, with world orders effecting changes in the forms of state, forcing modes of social relations of production to change. George (1994:180) confirms that, "In Cox's view, change can therefore not be explained from the top down, but rather as occurring "as part of a complex matrix, as changes in social forces at all levels help restructure world order". Apparently paradoxically, however, in his detailed analyses of transformation, Cox always starts at the bottom.

While many authors who explore the issue of change leave us with the question of where the emancipatory potential for transforming the existing order lies, Cox explicitly addresses the question of the motive force for change. According to him, an explanation for why the system changes can be traced to the realm of social forces

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[17] The notion of social forces represents an attempt to go beyond the conventional Marxist notion of the social relations of production, although this clearly is its conceptual source". George (1994:178) claims that Cox's social forces approach "is concerned with the interconnection of three dimensions of power: (1) that concerning the productive process, (2) that concerning the relations between classes – social power, and (3) that encompassing political power – control over the state" (George, 1994:178).

[18] Cf. Cox (1996:12) for an application of this model to the Cold War.

(1996:140) and "the social forces generated by changing production processes are the starting point for thinking about possible futures" (1996:113). He emphasises that the focus should not only be on social forces within states, but should also take into account transnational social forces.

As already stated, Cox rejects the positivist assumption that it is possible to identify universal laws of social action – including transformation. In line with his historicist approach, he argues that characteristics and changes that explain one order are not the same as those that explain another, but concedes that it may be possible to identify common elements. In other words, the study of transformation needs to focus on particular historical periods. It follows, then, that the future "appears indeterminate. We cannot be sure, following the historicist-dialectical mode of thought, which of the structural changes we perceive as going on at present will, in the perspective of future world order, appear as the significant explanatory ones" (1996:77).

However, Cox sees a way out of total indeterminism by proposing a focus on conflict as the origin of change. He goes on to suggest that the kinds of crises we should focus upon are not crises in international relations *per se* – i.e., conflict arising among the actors of a particular system – but conflicts affecting the parameters of the system – i.e., those that might lead to a change of the system rather than merely changes within the system" (Cox, 1996:77). Even more explicitly, he argues, "We must shift the problem of changing world order back from international institutions to national societies" (1996:140). The logic is that these internal crises ultimately affect the international system. This is in contrast to the general position taken in IR, with states being treated as unitary actors and their internal characteristics being dismissed as insignificant in explaining the workings of the international system.

4.8   Bringing domestic factors back in

This leads us to the question of the role of sub-state social forces in IR explanations. Many IR scholars, like Wendt, do not take into account the role that national domestic sources may play in bringing about transformation of the global political system. They justify this on the grounds that their explanatory framework is the international state system, and they are thus practising systemic theorising. It follows that

bracketing off certain issues (in this case, sub-state forces) is a necessary part of theorising.

The issue of whether, for analytical purposes, one should separate the state system from domestic politics as well as the international economy and international society, is an important one. Cox shares Ruggie's suspicion "that the transformation from the medieval to the modern order cannot be understood solely in terms of a general international-systems theory...but probably has to be explained in terms of changing state structures and changing modes of production" (1996:54). Cox's historical-dialectic approach enquires into the social processes that create and transform forms of state and the state system itself.

Cox (1996:133) also quotes from Gramsci[19] on the relationship between domestic social forces and international relations: "Do international relations precede or follow (logically) fundamental social relations? There can be no doubt that they follow". Cox interprets this in the following manner: "He was saying that basic changes in international power relations or world order, which are observed as changes in the military-strategic and geopolitical balance, can be traced to fundamental changes in social relations" (1996:133).

Cox also relates this view to his study of hegemony and the 'counter-hegemonic' forces whose aim it is to undermine hegemony. Such forces could be states, such as a coalition of developing states opposing the dominance of the highly industrialised state, or non-state actors such as classes, or new social movements. While the impact of counter-hegemonic movements will be global, Cox firmly believes that the source of these movements can only be national or domestic. One can thus justifiably draw the conclusion that Cox regards sub-state forces and processes as the starting point for an investigation into transformation at the global level.

Leysens (2002:138) notes that "Cox is not a "structuralist" in the sense that he views structure as the ultimate determinant of human action". He however questions Cox's

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[19] See Gramsci, A. (edited and translated by Hoare, Q. and Nowell Smith, G. (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* New York: International Publishers (p. 366).

assumption that those who suffer most from the inequalities of the current global economic system – the so-called marginalised – can and will act as a potential form of transformation, and comes to the conclusion that, based on empirical research, this is unlikely. He explains Cox's misjudgment by noting that Cox "never investigated the individual (aggregated) motives of those who he sees as a (potential) threat to the established order" (Leyens, 2002:17). I share Leysens' pessimistic view of the emancipatory role of the marginalised – they have largely been absorbed by the system and cannot conceive of an alternative to the current system. Reading Cox's work in totality, however, one comes to the conclusion that, whilst identifying it as a possibility, he regards an uprising or counterhegemony by the marginalised to be an unlikely event. So it appears that he would, in fact, agree with Leysens's assessment.

4.9   Future alternative world orders: Cox's dialectical approach in action

Cox makes it clear that there are no predetermined or inevitable outcomes in terms of the future of the global system when he notes, "There is no iron determinism or historical inevitability at work in the process of structural transformation of the world system. There is rather a balance of constraints inherent in the existing world order, with opportunity inherent in the process of change itself" (1996:251). As already mentioned, Cox also believes that one goal of critical theory should be to identify and limit the range of potential alternative world orders. To this end, he offers scenarios of potential alternative world orders, which will be the focus of a very brief discussion in this section.

Cox justifies the labels "post-hegemonic", "post-Westphalian", and "post-globalisation" that he applies to future world orders on the grounds that the uncertainty of what the future holds limits us to depicting it "in terms of a negation or potential negation of the dominant tendencies we have known" (1996:150). He identifies the Westphalian state system, hegemony and globalisation[20] as the main

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[20] Cox sees globalisation as including the internationalisation of production and related internationalisation of labour (which refers to the fact that "capital considers the productive resources of the world as a whole and locates elements of complex globalized production systems at points of greatest advantage", as well as the internationalisation of the state...(where "the priority has shifted to one of adapting domestic economics to the perceived exigencies of the world economy") (1996:192-196).

candidates for negation. It must be noted that these future alternatives are not mutually exclusive. Although Cox deals with them separately, presumably for clarity's sake, there are areas of overlap. Those social forces working towards counterhegemony are likely to be the same that oppose the globalisation trend.

Cox's vision of a post-Westphalian global order takes a similar form to that envisioned by other IR scholars (e.g. Hedley Bull's "new medievalism") – namely a multi-level system consisting of various multilateral processes and a complex of political-economic units, of which states are only one kind, interacting in a way that encompasses a variety of different identities and forces, which resembles the multi-level order of medieval Europe (Cox, 1996: 245,308,517). He further notes that structures of authority have changed to include three levels: the macro-regional level, the old state (or Westphalian) level, and the micro-regional level (Cox, 1993:263).

In line with his historical-dialectic approach, Cox's response to the question of how a hegemonic world order ends is that its end is inherent in the contradictions that exist within it. The world order which comes about as a result of hegemony generates global inequalities which eventually lead to feelings of frustration, alienation, and opposition. As a result, the hegemon loses its legitimacy, and has to resort to coercive forms of dominance, which, paradoxically, accelerates its decline. If we then start from the assumption that hegemony is in decline, Cox (1996:518) sets out four alternative scenarios for what might follow.

The most likely outcome is a continuation or a revival of the principles of the declining hegemony supported by the co-operation of a group of powerful states. The second possibility, namely the founding of a new hegemony by another state seems unlikely under the present circumstances, as there is no obvious current contender for the role of world hegemon. This is particularly the case if we adopt the Gramscian notion of hegemony which involves more than material dominance (which a state like China might be able to achieve in the foreseeable future). The third scenario, that of a nonhegemonic order lacking effective universal principles of order and functioning as an interplay of rival powerful states, each with their client states, is regarded as "a distinct possibility, in case of breakdown, for example, through major financial crisis" (1996:518).

The final possibility, a post- or counter-hegemonic order[21] anchored in a broader diffusion of power, in which a large number of collective forces, including states, achieve some agreement upon universal principles of an alternative order without dominance" (1996:518). Such a new order would involve an attempt at ending global relations of dependence. The forces who could attempt to undermine hegemony could be a group of (developing) states, or non-state actors, such as social movements. Cox also believes that, while their impact will be global, their origin will be national. The consensual aspect of hegemony would be maintained, but its coercive counterpart would be absent. In that sense, thus, it would no longer be a hegemonic order. Additionally, it would be more democratic, ideally have more civil-society buy-in, and have a strong multilateral basis[22].

However desirable this alternative order may be, Cox believes that it remains a distant, but unlikely, outcome. The reason for the unlikelihood of the successful emergence of a counter- or post-hegemonic order is that, according to Cox, it would have to be preceded by a number of steps. The first entails a mutual recognition of the equality of different civilizations and cultures (in contrast to the universalisation of the values and principles of one particular civilisation under a hegemonic order). At the same time, it would be necessary to identify a common ground amongst these divergent civilisations, in other words, move to what Cox calls "a kind of supraintersubjectivity that would provide a bridge among the distinct and separate subjectivities of the different coexisting traditions of civilizations". Perhaps the biggest problem preventing the emergence of a counterhegemonic order is the lack of cohesion/coherence between potential counterhegemonic forces. Although it is possible to identify a number of counterhegemonic tendencies in the world, they are by no means unified enough to constitute a real challenge (Cox, 1996:152,256). While, for example, some observers have seen in the anti-globalisation protests the potential for more wide-spread resistance from below, others like Scholte[23] (quoted in

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[21] Cox uses the terms interchangeably: his description of counterhegemony in two separate articles (see 1996:115, originally published in 1981, and 1996:256, originally published in 1989) coincide with his account of a posthegemonic order in a later article (see 1996:151, originally published in 1992).

[22] Cf. Cox's work on civil society (1999) and multilateralism (1997).

[23] Scholte, J.A. (2000) "Cautionary Reflections on Seattle" in *Millennium*, vol.29. no.4 (p.116).

Higgott, 2001:136) have been more cautious by noting that "halting a new round of trade liberalization is not the same thing as building a better world".

Cox also sees the contradictions that can lead to its transformation as being inherent to the globalisation phenomenon. While economic and social globalisation are reaching tremendous proportions, at the same time, we are witnessing an increasing polarisation of rich and poor and related disruptive effects. Unlike Marxists, who focus only on the contradictions and divisions related to production, Cox argues that in today's world, categories defined in relation to production are complicated by additional categories of gender, ethnicity, religion, and region, which, in contrast to the Marxist concept of class, appear to be the new bases for segmentation. Such existing sources of conflict may in fact be exacerbated by globalisation, as they become identified with and manipulated in the interest of economic and social cleavages (1996:156). Ironically, this process of increased polarisation serves to help globalisation sustain itself as, instead of encouraging a unified counter-reaction to the effects of globalisation, it exacerbates differences between peripheral social groups negatively affected by globalisation.

It should be clear that, according to Cox, both hegemony and globalisation can only be effectively countered by a coherent coalition of opposition, of which there is not currently much evidence. In a 1999 study on the role of civil society[24] in bringing about an alternative world order, Cox notes that there is much violence in the world, "but none of it could be called revolutionary in the sense of promising a transformation of society". He claims that "world politics is in [such] a condition of turbulent stasis, with little hope of calm but no prospect of fundamental change" (1999:3). Instead, he proposes that civil society may have become "the surrogate for a revolution that seems unlikely to happen" (1999:4).

Cox emphasises the ideational aspect of civil society, maintaining that it "is not just an assemblage of actors, i.e. autonomous social groups. It is also the realm of contesting ideas in which the intersubjective meanings upon which people's sense of

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[24] According to Cox (1999:10) "Civil society is now usually understood to refer to the realm of autonomous group action distinct from both corporate power and the state".

'reality' are based can become transformed and new concepts of the natural order of society can emerge" (1999:10). In terms of the potential emancipatory and transformative power of civil society, he warns that, ironically, civil society can also simply reflect existing political, social and economic power. Thus, while civil society should be "the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalization of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives", in reality, "states and corporate interests influence the development of this current version of civil society towards making it an agency for stabilizing the social and political *status quo*" (Cox, 1999:10-11).

Nevertheless, Cox notes that there is some evidence of "a new vitality of 'bottom-up' movement in civil society as a counterweight to the hegemonic power structure and ideology". It remains weak and uncoordinated, however, and is still far from becoming a viable counterhegemonic force. Cox emphasises the role of 'organic intellectuals', a term borrowed from Gramsci, in bridging the differences between the various groups disadvantaged by globalisation, and devising a common strategy towards reaching the goal of social equity (1999:26). Ultimately, the "contemporary deity" which proclaims that there is no alternative "will have to be deconstructed to make way for an alternative vision of a world economy regulated in the interest of social equity and non-violent resolution of conflict" (Cox, 1999:27).

Whilst being sceptical about the ability of the masses to bring about transformation, Cox largely neglects to consider the role of specialised interest groups who may be able to act on behalf of the marginalised. He does consider the role of organic intellectuals in developing strategies, but does not consider the role of grassroots-based groups or transnational networks which advocate on behalf of poor nations. Here the very broad social movements literature is informative, but will not be addressed here as it warrants an independent investigation in its own right.

There is therefore no uncertainty regarding Cox's normative vision, which is predisposed towards transformation towards an alternative world order, based on greater social equity and a greater diffusion of power (1996:250). His interest in understanding transformation has its root in his desire to effect emancipatory change, and he is explicit about his normative position: "Social science is never neutral. It is,

therefore, only fair to warn the reader that my purpose in undertaking this survey was to discover and encourage avenues of enquiry that might in the long run aid towards the transformation of power relations both within and among nations in the direction of greater social equity" (Cox, 1996:377). Sinclair (1996:3) agrees that, "In Cox's worldview the future represents an opportunity to break with the structures of the past and thus the potential to escape the strictures that bind human potential" (Sinclair, 1996:3).

Cox's approach is a Gramscian one, which "insists upon an ethical dimension to analysis, so that the questions of justice, legitimacy and moral credibility are integrated sociologically into the whole and into many of its key concepts". Ultimately, "the normative goal of the Gramscian approach is to move towards the solution of the fundamental problem of political philosophy: the nature of the good society and thus, politically, the construction of an 'ethical' state and a society in which personal development, rational reflection, open debate, democratic empowerment and economic and social liberation can become more widely attainable" (Gill, 1993c:24-25). At the same time, however, he cannot be accused of being utopian as he is fully aware of the constraints on potential world orders by current historical structures and processes: "The future shape of world order is conditioned in the first place by the existing world and the options it allows, and in the second place by the normative aims behind the preponderant formative initiatives" (Cox, 1996:250). In fact, one could even accuse Cox of being too guarded and too realistic in his assessment of the real possibilities for bottom-up change. In his attempt to avoid utopianism, perhaps he is overlooking some real potential for change.

In summary, Cox, with his unique approach, has contributed significantly not only to the understanding of historical processes of global change, but also in terms of the advancement of an emancipatory project related to change. Instead of jumping on the mainstream bandwagon, Cox has chosen the road less travelled, consciously distancing himself from the core of the field in order to develop an alternative framework of the workings of the global system, and especially the phenomenon of change. Fully aware of the complexity of change, he has advocated that it requires an holistic perspective as "the conventional separations of politics, economics and society become inadequate for the understanding of change" (Cox, 1993:259).

Additionally, the critical potential of Cox's approach lies in its willingness to ask whether practice reflects the normative goals and ideals of the polity. The transformative, innovative and emancipatory dimensions of theory are thus at the heart of his work, and Strange's description of Cox as "an eccentric in the best English sense of the word, a loner, a fugitive from intellectual camps of victory" (1988:269-270) remains a fitting portrayal.

4.10 Summation

The aim of this chapter was to provide an insight into the work of Robert W.Cox, particularly as it relates to change in the international system. The conclusion drawn was that, of the three authors investigated in this study, Cox focuses most explicitly on the issue of global transformation, and advocates the need for and normative merits of such fundamental change. Unlike Wendt and Ruggie, Cox adopts a political economy orientation to understanding change, emphasising that global economic structures are just as important in thinking about change as are political structures. This also extends to his view that any IR theory aimed at explaining global transformation should not be restricted to an analysis of relations between states, but should broaden its scope to include any number of actors and processes that may have an impact on transformation. At the same time it is important to note that, whilst acknowledging the role of non-state actors and the changing role of the state, he is not suggesting that we are witnessing the demise of the state.

Cox's distinction between problem-solving and critical theory provides an important basis for his theoretical developments, which emphasise the need to critically evaluate and address the inequities that form part of the prevailing world order. Importantly, although he exhibits a clear and well-motivated preference for critical theory, unlike other critical theorists, he does not reject problem-solving theory out of hand.

As is the case with Wendt, Cox privileges ontological issues. An important component of the world is what he calls 'historical structures', which consist of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions. These forces can, in turn, be seen to interact at three different spheres of activity or human organisation: social relations of production, forms of state, and at the world order or global system level. It is the

interplay between the different components of historical structures that enables change to occur.

He thus regards the relationship between idealism and materialism as being a dialectical, reciprocal one, and consequently adopts a middle-of-the-road approach to the role of ideas versus material forces. Cox's Gramscian understanding of the concept hegemony, which gives it an added intersubjective, ideational element, brings an important component to the idealism-materialism debate, namely the interplay between power and ideas.

In terms of the mechanisms of transformation, Cox's historicist-dialectical model of thought focuses on the role of power and views transformation as the result of conflicts. While many authors who explore the issue of change leave us with the question of where the emancipatory potential for transforming the existing order lies, Cox explicitly addresses the question of the motive force for change, arguing that it can be found within the realm of social forces.

In line with his critical theory perspective, Cox limits his vision of potential future world orders to those that constitute feasible alternatives, given current and historical constraints. These include 'post-hegemonic', 'post-Westphalian', and 'post-globalisation' systems, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Cox, however, remains sceptical of the actual potential for change, particularly with regard to the ability of the masses to bring about transformation. Despite these reservations Cox, in contrast to Wendt and Ruggie, is unambiguously predisposed towards transformation to an alternative world order, one based on greater social equity and a greater diffusion of power.

The next chapter will begin to draw together some of the issues touched on in the previous three chapters, focusing on the materialism-idealism debate as it relates to global political transformation. The contributions of our three authors will be crucial in developing a position in this debate from which global change can be studied most fruitfully.

CHAPTER 5

Building Bridges in the Materialism-Idealism Debate

5.1 Outlining the debate

What factors should weigh more heavily in an analysis of global political transformation? To enhance our understanding of fundamental change, should the focus be on material or ideational factors? The reason why this issue warrants an entire chapter is due to the fact that, as Wendt notes, the extent to which the material base is constituted by ideas is a question which "bears [heavily] on the transformative potentials of the international system" (1999:95). Whether we regard material factors or ideas as being most significant to international relations will influence our conceptualisation and understanding of what change is, how it occurs, as well as its implications. Despite Jacobsen's suggestion that we are in "the aftermath of the ideas debate" (2003:40), the assertion here is that, in fact, the debate continues to rage in the IR community.

This chapter will delineate the general debate between idealists and materialists, and consider where our three authors - Ruggie, Wendt, and Cox - are placed in this debate. The conclusion drawn is that all three - despite their differences - advocate a 'middle ground' position, and that such a conciliatory approach aimed at transcending the materialism-idealism debate is a requirement for making a meaningful contribution to the analysis of global political transformation. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to outlining this 'middle ground' position, and considering the advantages and challenges associated with it. The position developed in this chapter thus represents one possible way in which material and ideational factors may be reconciled.

There are many different ways in which one could distinguish between different approaches to international relations, or more specifically, to change in international relations. One could, for example, categorise an approach according to the particular facet of social relations that it prioritises – whether it be politics, economics, culture, psychology or ecology[1], to name but a few. In this chapter, a more general distinction will be made between material and ideational approaches. Both will thus be used as umbrella terms to incorporate what might otherwise be viewed as distinct approaches, and it is therefore of particular importance to clarify exactly how these concepts are to be understood here.

Recalling the distinction made in Chapter One, it is possible to differentiate broadly between materialists, extreme idealists, and moderate or 'thin' idealists. **Materialists** assume the social world of international relations is a world shaped by the material structure of the international system. Furthermore, they hold that "material reality exists, regardless of perception or interpretation, and that what we know is a faithful representation of reality out there" (Adler, 2002:111, endnote 2). (Neo)realism, neoliberalism, and approaches that prioritise economic factors in their analyses of transformation (e.g. Marxists) would fall under this category, while **idealists** can be divided into:

(1) *Extreme idealists* who argue that the social world is constituted by language and ideas, and therefore that "the foundation for all knowledge is in the mind" (Adler, 2002:111, endnote 3). Postmodernists and poststructuralists would form part of this category;

(2) *'Thin'[2] idealists* who believe that social reality emerges from the attachment of meaning and functions to physical objects by means of collective understanding. While they assume that ideas construct meaning, they also recognise that social reality does exist beyond the theorist's view. The so-called conventional or modernist constructivists (including Wendt and Ruggie) make up this category.

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[1] See Scholte (1993:101-110) for a description of such single-facet explanations.

From the outline above, it should be clear that we are dealing with complex ontological and epistemological issues which warrant a philosophical examination. While the most common distinction between idealist and materialist positions is based on ontology, the position adopted here is the one put forward by Smith (2000:574) that one can see "neither ontology nor epistemology as prior to the other, but instead see the two of them as mutually and inextricably interrelated". In other words, ontological assumptions have implications for epistemology, and vice versa. Let us start with the ontological differences between the two approaches.

In its broadest sense, a materialist analysis of international relations prioritises the role that material factors play, and accords only marginal status to ideational factors, which are seen as merely reflecting the material world. Neorealism (e.g. Waltz), for example, holds that material factors, such as the distribution of capabilities in the international system, are the main determinants of continuity and change. Classical realism (e.g. Morgenthau) assumes that national interests are given in terms of power and that behaviour is merely a rationalisation of interests. Neoliberal causal approaches (e.g. Keohane and Goldstein) purport to bring in ideas, but limit their role to that of causal variables. Economistic approaches (e.g. Marx) regard economic factors as the main factors influencing international relations.

What these different approaches have in common is that they all regard interests as being exogenously given — i.e., they do not ask how interests are constituted, or how they can be changed. In the context of international relations, therefore, states are seen as having interests prior to social action. So, for example, neorealism argues that state interests are derived from structure, specifically the anarchical structure and the material distribution of capabilities between states. Marxist approaches, on the other hand, maintain that the international capitalist structure and the ongoing class struggle determine interests. Marx also clearly sought to show that ideas are secondary to material production in his assertion that it is the contradictory relationship between owner (non-producer) and worker (producer) classes that generates the development of history.

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[2] The adjective 'thin' is used here to depict a more moderate, conventional form of idealism as opposed to an extreme version. This follows the use of the term in the distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' constructivism by authors like Wendt (1999:2).

While the work of some neoliberal institutionalists (e.g. Goldstein and Keohane) can be said to be a form of ideas-based approach (see Bieler, 2001), for the purposes of the study it will be classified as materialist. The reasons are that, whilst according a greater role to ideas, they still only employ them as additional variables to account for the variance left unexplained by rationalism. In other words, they continue to work in the rationalist / positivist model. Furthermore, they assume exogenous interest formation, and treat interests as distinct from rather than significantly shaped or constituted by ideas.

While the extreme idealist position has been noted above, the main focus will be on the 'thin' idealist position, as found in certain forms of constructivism (e.g. Wendt, Ruggie). All variants of constructivism share an *ontology* that portrays the social world as consisting of intersubjective structures and processes. In this world, "material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded" (Wendt, 1995:73). Several crucial implications follow from this. Firstly, the social world consists both of material objects and intersubjective understandings. Secondly, social facts, which are facts only by human agreement, differ from brute material facts such as mountains because, unlike the latter, their existence depends on "the attachment of collective knowledge to physical reality". Thirdly, it follows that actors' (states') interests and identities are therefore not assumed as given, nor determined by material circumstances. Instead, it is believed that they are constituted (and therefore can also be changed by) the intersubjective social context. Conventional constructivism thus "puts to rest the naïve notion that *either* material objects *or* 'ideas' – but not both – constitute interests. Instead, constructivism advances the notion that interests *are* ideas; that is, they are ontologically intersubjective but epistemologically objective interpretations about, and for, the material world...This means that interests cannot be mechanically deduced from international anarchy and the distribution of material resources" (Adler, 2002:102). Finally, although individuals carry knowledge, ideas and meanings in their heads...they also know, think and feel only in the context of and with reference to collective or intersubjective understandings (Adler, 2002:100). This last point brings us to epistemological issues.

With regard to epistemology, both neorealism and neoliberalism follow a positivist approach, which means they work within a realist epistemology. According to Dessler (1999:124) the core premises of epistemological realism are: (1) that we inhabit a world whose nature and existence is neither logically nor causally dependent on any mind; (2) that some of our beliefs about this world are accurate, even if incomplete, descriptions and thereby qualify as true; and (3) that our methods of inquiry enable us to discover whether at least some of our beliefs about the world are true. Furthermore, they rely on methodological individualism. In other words, explanations are reduced to the properties of individual units (states) and/or their interactions. Marxist epistemology is based on a dialectical method of class analysis in which everything is explained by the contradictory relationship between classes that lies at the base of society[3].

In contrast, there are significant epistemological disagreements between constructivists. For example, as Adler (2002:101) notes, some modernist constructivists follow scientific realism[4] (e.g. Carlsnaes, 1992; Wendt, 1999) while others (e.g. Ruggie, 1998a) prefer interpretive methods. Others still (e.g. Kratochwil 1989) reject the natural science conception of causation, while postmodernist constructivists study how the world is constructed by means of language. In other words, for extreme idealists like postmodernists, constructivism is both an epistemology as well as an ontology, while for thin idealists it is only an ontology. But what they all have in common is a focus on the notion of intersubjectivity, which refers to mutually shared meanings / understandings of rules, values, norms. Guzzini (2000:164) explains the concept of intersubjectivity with using the metaphor of language: "languages are neither reducible to objective materialism, nor to subjective individualism – they are intersubjective. They exist in the shared meanings of their users and are reproduced through their practices". Ruggie and Kratochwil's (1986) article was seminal in this regard, as they identified the role of intersubjectivity in

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[3] See Hobson (2000) and MacLean (1981) for further detail on Marxist epistemology.

[4] The philosophy of science approach labelled 'realism' or 'scientific realism' needs to be distinguished from the IR theory realism, which was conceptualised in Chapter One. The main characteristics of scientific realism are the assumption that the (material) world is independent of the mind and language of individual observers, and the belief that certain phenomena like atoms or states exist despite the fact that we cannot observe them (Wendt, 1999:51). While such an approach is usually associated with materialism, some thin idealists (notably Wendt) also adopt a scientific realist epistemology.

regime analysis and the problematic contradiction between using a positivist epistemology to address an issue with an ontological focus on norms. They questioned the ability of an individualist epistemological framework that assumed actors' self-interests as endogenous to understand intersubjectively held beliefs. From a position of epistemological intersubjectivity, agents and the social / intersubjective structure are regarded as influencing each other mutually, resulting in changes in or the reproduction of agents' interests. This is in contrast to the methodological individualism of rationalist theories in which agents have fixed identities and interests.

Having outlined the main differences between material and ideational approaches, we have established that in terms of change, materialists assert that material factors and interests override ideas as the main forces of order and change in the international system. In contrast, for idealists, international relations is not only affected, but also constituted by language, ideas, beliefs, and intersubjective understandings. For them, continuity and change in international relations are ideas-driven.

While, as noted above, it is possible to outline the extreme positions of materialism and idealism, it is also important to note that such extremes hardly exist in IR (or in the social sciences, for that matter) today. As Sørensen rightly states, one would be hard pressed to find examples of theorists who would argue that the social world exists purely of material factors or ideas. In other words, the real debate is based on disagreements about the relative explanatory value of ideas versus material forces (1998:91). Having rephrased the debate in these terms, we can proceed to outline its development over the past decade.

Whilst for most of the second half of the twentieth century, IR approaches prioritised material factors, the 1990s saw a renewed interest in the search for ideational or cultural explanations. The reason for this development was the end of the Cold War, and the mainstream theories' inability to predict or explain it. It was not only noticeable on the fringes of the field - even some mainstream scholars conceded that ideas, under certain circumstances, do matter. There was thus a renewed recognition - renewed in the sense that classical realists like Carr were fully aware of the importance of ideational factors - that the international system cannot be explained

only in terms of material relations, but that there is a considerable amount of explanatory power inherent in the intersubjective understandings which constitute the underlying principles of the international system. As Jacobsen (1995:283) notes, "It now seems obligatory for every work of international political economy to consider the "material power of ideas" as at least a mediating variable – even if only to then dismiss it".

One of the most notable demonstrations of the importance of an ideas approach as a supplement to interest-based, rational actor models by mainstream scholars was provided by Goldstein and Keohane[5]. They developed a causal analysis of the impact of ideas (as intervening variables) on foreign policy. The problem inherent in their approach to ideas, however, was that ideational explanations were regarded more as 'add-ons' than as alternative explanations. In other words, instead of making the case that ideas have a force of their own, they promoted an ideas approach as a useful supplement to interest-based approaches, utilising ideas to explain choices made within the constraints set by material conditions. As Jacobsen (2003:44) and Laffey and Weldes (1997:193) point out, these developments – despite presenting themselves as alternatives – never presented a real challenge to the mainstream approaches. From their inception, they were never more than minor modifications to the conceptual base of reigning models. Laffey and Weldes (1997:200) identify a second deficiency inherent in the Goldstein-Keohane approach: they argue that by continuing to work in the rationalist framework, the conceptualisation of ideas was flawed from the start. Because their approach remained anchored in a positivist approach which assumes exogenous interest formation, ideas were treated as being separate from interests, and therefore as rival explanatory variables. Furthermore, ideas were regarded as causal rather than constitutive variables, and the focus was on individual rather than social ideas.

Given these developments, the materialism-idealism debate subsequently became centred on the issue of whether ideational theories merely serve to supplement materialist theories, or have an inherent explanatory power of their own. Instead of

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[5] See Goldstein, J. and Keohane, R. (eds.) (1993) Ideas and Foreign Policy: Beliefs, Institutions and Political Change. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. See Ruggie (1998b:856-869) for a critical discussion of this study.

asking whether ideas matter, the focus turned to asking *how* ideas matter, and exploring the interaction between ideas and material forces. Wendt's phrasing of the debate suggests that "...the question is how material forces and ideas are articulated, not materialism versus idealism" (Wendt, 2000:170). One of the responses to this question is the constructivist position that not only should ideas be treated as causal variables, but attention should also be paid to their constitutive properties. This involves a focus on the social embeddedness of ideas, and the notion that socially shared ideas not only regulate actors' behaviour but also constitute their identity.

IR theorists who commit themselves to following an ideational approach to the study of change in international relations face many challenges. As Palan (2000:577) notes, "It is, of course, one thing to begin from the premise that ideas and norms are the principal agents of change; it is an entirely different proposition to demonstrate the inherent necessity of this to be the case, and in addition to outline the specific form by which the 'construction' of the international environment, on its opportunities and constraints, takes place". Ideational approaches are therefore by no means unproblematic. Desch, in an assessment of the significance of ideas in security studies, also identifies potential challenges to assessing the explanatory power of cultural (or ideational) theories. Firstly, he observes that cultural / ideational variables such as collectively held ideas, norms and beliefs are difficult to define and hence to operationalise. Secondly, ideational theories are often regarded as case-specific and hence are not applicable to or testable across a range of cases. While some scholars believe that culture is amenable to systematic study (e.g. Wendt) others are more sceptical (1998:150-158). Despite these challenges, many scholars have opted to include and/or prioritise ideas in their analyses of the international system.

A considerable part of the idealism-materialism debate has involved criticising scholars and particular approaches for allegedly advocating either an extreme materialist or idealist position. For example, as already mentioned, scholars working in the mainstream, and in particular the realist tradition, are seen as focusing on material capabilities at the expense of ideational factors. As Cox claims, "[n]eorealism puts the accent on states reduced to their dimension of material force and similarly reduces the structure of world order to the balance of power as a configuration of material forces" (1996:102). Whilst this is the view prevalent

amongst non-mainstream scholars, it is not the only one. Barkin (2003:329), for example, disagrees with this allegation, maintaining that "the assumption of the primacy of material capabilities is something more often ascribed to realist theory by its critics than claimed by realists themselves". Burch (2000:197), similarly, notes that some scholars who may be accused of prioritising material factors, do not completely disregard ideational factors. Some authors have also pointed out that neorealists often practise idealism almost subconsciously. Dessler, for example, notes how even though neorealists emphasise material factors, at closer look they conceptualise these material capabilities in ideational terms. According to him, "They describe things like tanks and missiles in a vocabulary that reveals the meaning these objects acquire from the social relationships and understanding in which they are embedded" (1999:127). This is important as, by showing that it is possible to interpret work by mainstream scholars as having ideational elements, one is forced to reconsider ideational approaches' alleged opposition to mainstream theories, and vice versa. The final point that needs to be made is that, as with constructivism, it is often the case that criticism which is relevant to the work of (a) particular individual(s) is applied without scrutiny to the entire approach.

The other side of the coin is the frequently cited criticism against constructivism. This is of particular importance to this study, as both Ruggie and Wendt have been classified as constructivists and have consequently been subjected to criticism of this nature. A critique often directed at constructivism is that it lacks a clear understanding of material forces, and especially material power. This critique probably derives from constructivism's professed focus on ideational factors. Palan (2000:576), for example, asserts that "constructivists are empirically and methodologically wrong: [that] in the last analysis 'ideas' are not the principled force of order and change in the international system; [that] material factors and material interests override the primacy of normatively constituted practices". Landolt, in a recent review article (2004:581) makes an even stronger case when she alleges that constructivists downplay and even *ignore* material structure and focus *only* on social structure.

Assertions by, for example, Adler (1997) that all constructivists follow a middle ground approach are, however, similarly flawed. On the idealist-materialist

continuum, Adler (1997:330) places constructivism in the middle, arguing that it "seizes the middle ground because it is interested in understanding how the *material, subjective and intersubjective* worlds interact in the social construction of reality". Both these depictions are misleading as they ignore the important differences in the way in which various constructivist scholars treat the issue of ideas versus material factors in the international system. Taking into account the almost diametrically opposite positions of different self-professed constructivists, the reigning confusion amongst critics is understandable. Fearon and Wendt (2002:58), for example, point out that, while "Constructivism is correctly seen as defined in part by opposition to materialism", "[t]he character of this opposition depends on how materialism is understood...Constructivism does not imply a radical 'ideas *all* the way down' idealism which denies any role whatsoever to material considerations". This leaves the reader with a considerable amount of uncertainty regarding what exactly their position is.

The father of constructivism, Nicholas Onuf, would be the one constructivist one could be sure of adopting an extreme idealist position. Ironically, however, he appears to advocate a middle ground position when he writes, "Rules are the social component, resources the material component of all human endeavours...Resources are nothing until mobilized though rules, rules are nothing until matched to resources to effectuate rule" (1989:64, quoted in Burch, 2000:189). One could replace "rules" with "ideas" in the broader constructivist discourse to emphasise the mutually interdependent nature of ideational and material factors in the international system.

To add to the confusion, some constructivist scholars working in the field of norms have also employed a rationalist approach of treating ideas as intervening variables and assuming material interests to be given. In his article on the end of the Cold War, Risse-Kappen (1995) takes the impact of ideas very seriously, but claims that "ideas intervene between material, power-related factors, on the one hand, and states interests and preferences, on the other" (1995:188). Unlike Wendt and Ruggie, who regard ideas as constitutive of interests, Risse-Kappen's conception is thus closer to the neoliberal conception of ideas as intervening variables.

In fact, even individual constructivist scholars seem to find it difficult to make up their minds with regard to the importance of ideas versus material factors. In a 1996 working paper, Reus-Smit writes that constructivists "emphasis[e] the primacy of normative *over* material structures" (1996:1). In a 1998 adaptation of the article (reprinted in 2002), it becomes, "the importance of normative or ideational structures of normative *as well as* material structures" (Price and Reus-Smit, 2002:1791, emphasis added).

Much criticism directed at constructivists' (mis)treatment of the material world thus appears to stem from an incorrect assumption that all constructivists propagate an extreme idealist approach. Levelling a critique at constructivism in general is clearly untenable if one takes into account the wide variety of scholars working under the constructivist banner. Given the diverse perspectives (both from within and outside of the approach) on where constructivism sits in the materialism-idealism debate, it might be more effective to evaluate different strands of constructivism - and preferably individual writers within those different strands - on their own merit.

5.2 Wendt, Ruggie and Cox: somewhere in between

The assertion here is that the two constructivist scholars reviewed in this study – despite their different broader theoretical frameworks – both adopt a middle ground position in terms of the idealism – materialism debate. This has been established in previous chapters, but will be underlined here. In Ruggie's case, for example, although he calls for the inclusion and prioritising of ideational factors in any explanations of the social world – including transformation, it would be a misinterpretation and gross exaggeration to maintain that he disregards the impact of material forces. As has been discussed in detail in Chapter 3, he explicitly states "the building blocks of international reality are ideational as well as material" (1998b:879).

In *Territoriality and beyond: problematising modernity in international relations* (reprinted in1998a), Ruggie explores developments in three "dimensions" that played a role in the emergence of the modern system of states. He claims that the three dimensions – material environments, strategic behaviour, and social epistemology – "are irreducible to one another" (1998a:180). Under changes in the material

environment he includes factors that a number of scholars of state building[6] have explored in detail, such as population growth, increase in trade, revenue raising, etc. He asserts that these changes placed strain on existing social arrangements, resulting in a need and a desire for transformation, and causing them ultimately to be replaced. Furthermore, he suggests that the material changes impacted on the existing institutional order by changing the constraints on and opportunities for social actors, resulting in new forms of social interaction[7] (1998a:182). Instead of claiming that material power is unimportant, Ruggie thus holds that its meaning and effects depend on the social structure of the system. Ultimately, he calls for a more balanced approach that includes both ideational and material factors. Here we find a strong commonality between Ruggie and Wendt.

Although, with statements like "the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces" (1999:1), Wendt makes a strong case in favour of idealism, he also ultimately tends towards a middle ground position. For example, while he insists that ideas are not mere variables but are *constitutive* of brute material forces (1999:38), elsewhere he suggests that material forces are in fact independent of ideas. He also stakes out a clear middle ground position when he maintains that "the structure of any social system ... might consist mostly of material conditions, mostly of ideas, or a balance of both" (1999:157).

In his criticism of the Marxist understanding of materialism (see 1999:94-95) Wendt conveniently ignores the neo-Marxist or Gramscian-inspired work of IR theorists like Cox, who provides an alternative to the classical Marxist understanding of materialism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, whilst still focusing on the central role played by production, Cox by no means interprets production in an economistic sense. Instead, for Cox, production is to be understood in the broadest sense. It covers not only the production of physical goods, but also the production and reproduction of knowledge and of the social relations that underlie the production of physical goods (Cox, 1989:39). In other words, Wendt and Ruggie, coming from a

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[6] See, for example, van Creveld (1999).

[7] See Ruggie (1998a:182-184) for examples.

different theoretical perspective - ultimately also share with Cox an interest in developing an approach which takes into account both material and ideational factors.

Despite drawing heavily on Marxism, Cox recognises that "Intersubjectively shaped reality, the institutions that structure how material life is organized and produced, is as much a part of the material world and as independent of individual volition as the brute physical material upon which those institutions work" (1996:149-150). As was established in the previous chapter, Cox is therefore a strong advocate of a balanced or middle ground approach to the idealism-materialism debate, as he is neither in favour of reducing explanations of change to either material or ideational factors. Instead, he emphasises that "The juxtaposition and reciprocal relationships of the political, ethical and ideological spheres of activity with the economic sphere avoids reductionism. It avoids reducing everything either to economics (economism) or to ideas (idealism) ... ideas and material conditions are always bound together, mutually influencing one another, and not reducible to the other" (Cox, 1996:131). Where Cox's approach to ideas does differ significantly from that of Ruggie and Wendt is in terms of the relationship between power and ideas, and the role of ideology.

5.3   Power, ideas and ideology

An allegation by Landolt (2004) that, by censoring material factors and focusing on the social structure constructivists lose their capacity to analyse relationships of power, should not be dismissed out of hand. She also charges that, by neglecting material factors, constructivists obscure the context of North /South material inequalities and the material incentives involved in norm construction. As already noted, the argument here is that not all writers working in the constructivist mode – notably Ruggie and Wendt – can be accused of neglecting or censoring material factors. The second part of Landolt's critique is, however, justified, although it does not logically follow from her primary allegation. Even though Wendt and Ruggie do take material factors into account, they are still guilty of neglecting the role of power, particularly in terms of global inequalities.

This is not to say that constructivists ignore the issue of power altogether. Wendt, for example, accepts that power matters in international relations, and even occasionally

allows for the importance of ideas being 'mediated by power relations' (1999:132, 330). He does not, however, elaborate on what he means by this. Instead, he chooses to address the criticism that constructivism does not accept the central role of power in the construction of international politics by redefining power as an ideational factor. In other words, Wendt argues that in mainstream theorising, power is incorrectly treated as a material explanatory factor. While neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism assume that material power, whether military or economic, is the single most important source of power in world politics, constructivism argues that both material and discursive power are necessary for any understanding of world affairs.

Whilst constructivists have developed a convincing argument that power is constituted primarily by ideas, they do not develop the notion further. One is still left with questions such as: does it not matter *whose* ideas we are talking about? What about the material power that underlies certain ideas and thus facilitates their promotion – for example the argument that the global promotion of American values and ideas relating to neoliberal economics and democracy is reinforced by its economic and military strength? This, in general, is a shortcoming of constructivist approaches. According to work done by Payne (2001), Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and others, new ideas or norms are successful due to a number of factors, including their ideational affinity with existing and accepted normative frameworks, the persuasiveness of the norm entrepreneurs, etc. Where does this leave the role of material power, however - including the notion that powerful states can (forcefully) persuade weaker states into adopting particular norms, whereas the opposite is not often true? Some scholars have justifiably expressed scepticism regarding whether power does not perhaps override normative goals. Frost phrases the argument as follows: "normative theorizing is not worthwhile, because what the theories prescribe can and will always be overridden by those with the power to do so", and "even if it were possible to establish how states ought to behave towards one another, the problem of getting states to behave in that way would remain" (Frost, 1996:61).

Landolt cites the constructivist treatment of transnational advocacy networks (TNAs) as an example of how, by neglecting the material advantages of northern NGOs, the power relations and political contestation within advocacy networks is ignored. She

points out the implications for global transformation by noting, "the change successfully promoted by TNAs is rarely if ever threatening to the existing international political and economic order...change does not happen when it threatens deep characteristics of the international social and material structure" (Landolt, 2004:584-585). Constructivists can therefore justifiably be criticised for focusing on the transformation of world politics without addressing the role of material power in creating and disseminating ideas and modes of discourse.

This leads us to an important point that distinguishes Cox's view of ideas from that of Wendt and Ruggie. Not only does he acknowledge the power *of* ideas, but also the power *behind* ideas. He therefore addresses an aspect that is conspicuously lacking in both Wendt and Ruggie's, and constructivists in general's analyses. Citing (2003:48) Peter Hall's study on Keynesianism, Jacobsen notes that Hall argues that "what matters is not the idea's intrinsic force in a given context but whether the idea reconciles the interests of elites...the more powerful the sponsors, the more powerful the ideas" (2003:48). He maintains that the view advanced by idealists that it is the power of the idea itself that counts is not convincing. In order for the idealist argument to be successful, it must first be "demonstrate[d] that interests are interpenetrated by ideas, then these same ideas must be shown to exert influence untainted by the very interests they have just been shown to interpenetrate". Jacobsen is unconvinced that this is possible, and warns of the dangers of losing sight "of the materialistic motives driving the success of an idea", leading to the "fetishising [of] ideas" (Jacobsen, 2003:48-49).

Returning to the question why one particular set of ideas (in times of change) is more successful than another, Bieler emphasises that the answer lies in the material structure and the ideology underlying certain ideas. In times of change, there is always more than one alternative strategy for the future. Bieler argues that "[w]hich course of action is chosen and which new order is established depends on which historical bloc is able to establish its strategy as the one generally accepted to be the best. It is here where ideology plays a decisive role as part of the successful hegemonic project by 'organic intellectuals'" (Bieler, 2001:98).

George (1997) applies this notion to the current state of international relations, contending that the dominance of neoliberalism, or what she calls the "Rule of the Right" is the result of decades of a conscious ideological effort. The upside is that this recognition that the current world order is neither natural nor inevitable but is a "conscious creation" opens up the possibility for a counter-project aimed at creating a different world. She also emphasises the material basis of ideas, arguing that "in order to prevail, ideas require material infrastructures"(George, 1997:4). In other words, if new ideas are to take hold and an alternative worldview is to be promoted, it will require financing.

One has to agree here with Bieler (2001:94) that a neo-Gramscian approach has a certain advantage over constructivism on the basis of "its ability to define clearly the material structure of ideas". Whilst employing the constructivist method of treating ideas as a part of the overall structure in the form of intersubjective meanings, the neo-Gramscian approach also utilises contributions made by what Bieler calls 'cognitive' approaches. For example, the neo-Gramscian emphasis on 'organic intellectuals' shows awareness of the fact that it is important to take into consideration who the supporters of particular ideas are, as ideas are often used to advance or legitimise particular worldviews. According to Bieler this "cognitive insight into the role of ideas can be incorporated into the 'constructivist' perspective, provided it is not used to attempt to detect causal relationships between ideas and policies, but to identify such legitimisation strategies in particular instances. Strategies are likely to be successful in cases where the legitimising ideas of a hegemonic project correspond to the 'intersubjective meanings' of the structure, because they will appear as logical. Conversely, it might be difficult to carry out hegemonic projects legitimised with ideas, which are in contradiction to the 'intersubjective meanings'" (2001:97-98).

At the same time, however, as Adler (1997:342) notes, a constructivist approach is valuable because it can show that "changing collective understandings of technology and national and global economies may have direct material affects on the wealth of nations". Relatedly, Frost (1996:64) claims that "it is not possible to characterize a power relationship at all without reference to the ideas (norms, morals, principles, etc.) which the wielder holds *and* to the ideas (norms, morals, principles, etc.) which the subject holds". He argues that the claim made by many Third World states that

the great Western powers exert unwarranted economic and political power against them is dependent on certain sets of political and economic ideas held by those in the developed and the developing states. In conclusion, therefore, as Adler (2002:103) emphasises, the imposition of meanings on the material world is one of the ultimate forms of power, and this is where constructivism's added value with regard to power lies. By combining a constructivist understanding of the role of ideas with Cox's clear acknowledgement of the importance of their material structure, one can thus avoid both economistic determinism, as well as the danger of treating ideas as being completely independent from material reality.

5.4   The case for a middle ground approach

That it is deceptive to try to develop a strict, exclusive dichotomy between material and ideational factors should by now be obvious. Such a dichotomy is especially problematic when it comes to the study of global change or transformation, which is a particularly complex and multi-faceted process. The international system, like the rest of the world around us, consists of a mixture of material factors and ideas. It follows that any attempt to conceptualise or analyse change in the international system must take both into account. Questions regarding the importance of ideas versus material factors in global political transformation are therefore misguided, as they have no answer. Keohane (2000:126) agrees, noting that "it is not immediately clear why we should have to choose between materialism and idealism" as "both positions seem to be based, untenably, on the assumption that either ideas or material forces are the most fundamental". It is also important to take note of Hay's assertion that the distinction between the material and the ideational is really only analytical. He maintains that analytical separations do serve a purpose, as long as the distinction is not reified and does not "crystallise into an ontological dualism" (2004:7).

Even so, many scholars in the field of IR have, for decades, relied on largely material explanations of change and other developments in the global system. In response to the a priori exclusion of ideas, a number of studies ended up on the opposite end of the spectrum, practising ideational determinism. This has lead to numerous debates over whether such overcompensation is necessary to bring balance to the field, or

whether - what is being asserted here - more conciliatory approaches that consider both material and ideational factors are required.

It is clear then, that both extreme idealism and extreme materialism contain serious problems. A middle ground which avoids these extremes thus appears to be the only way forward, although it, too, is not without its challenges. The middle ground is premised on the notion that our theories about the world always contain elements of ideas and material factors. It is especially important to be aware of the effects of both material conditions and ideas on large-scale change – for it is the interplay of these that ultimately brings about transformation. The contention here is that not only is a middle ground position desirable, but it is also possible. A number of IR scholars agree. Sterling Folker (2002:75), for example, argues that achieving an ontological common ground between realism and constructivism is possible, while Hopf (2000) notes that constructivism has an "open ontology, which allows for dialogue with realists". Relatedly, Barkin (2003:326) asserts that "Claims by constructivists that realist theory is incompatible with intersubjective epistemologies and methodologies are based on either caricatures or very narrow understandings of realism". This of course begs the question: what are the outlines of a middle ground position, and how can the work of our three authors assist in developing such an approach?

5.5   Outlines of a middle ground position

It must be noted at the outset that it is not possible to pinpoint an exact position for the ontological middle ground – instead, it constitutes a wide field, encompassing a large number of, at first, seemingly incompatible approaches. What they do, of course, have in common, is a desire to avoid extremist positions, and instead develop more balanced, inclusive perspectives. And so it is with Wendt, Ruggie and Cox who, whilst all ultimately advocating a middle ground position to the study of change, approach it from different sides. While Ruggie and Wendt focus first on the role of ideas and then bring in material factors, Cox starts from a (Marxist) material base, from where he calls for the inclusion of ideas. Relatedly, the rationale for different scholars advocating a move towards the middle ground will vary.

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Extreme idealist or materialist positions can be associated with narrow or tunnel vision, while a middle ground position takes a more comprehensive, integrative view of the complexity of change. The middle ground can be regarded as constituting a communicative bridge between the two non-communicating idealist and materialist poles. This can be illustrated by means of a diagram.
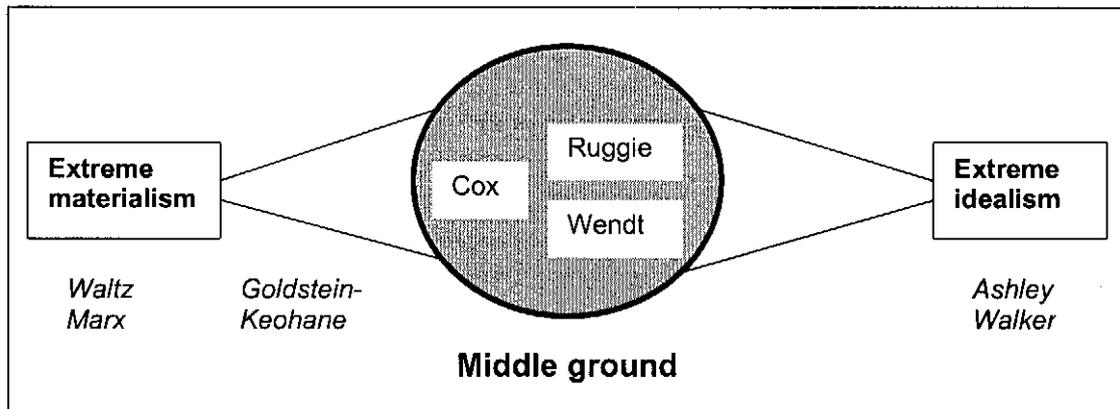
A middle ground approach to the materialism-idealism debate should, however, not be seen as an attempt to develop a unified theory of IR that merges existing theories. Neither should it be aimed at subsuming one approach under another. Rather, it represents a position of theoretical tolerance and openness – a willingness to recognise and borrow from the strengths of contending approaches. At the same time, however, including ideational factors only as additives to what remains essentially a materialist explanation, does not suffice. A true middle ground approach should go beyond importing aspects of an ideational approach into a material approach, or vice versa, without changing the basic ontological and epistemological framework.

One of the most important components of a middle ground position should be the notion of intersubjectivity. While material factors do play an important role in, for example, limiting the options open to actors, they have no causal relevance independently of the intersubjective contexts in which they exist. In other words, their relevance is largely constituted by the intersubjective meanings ascribed to them. Wendt's example of the greater threat posed to the USA by North Korean than British nuclear warheads (even though the latter have a substantially larger arsenal) is an excellent illustration of this notion. This is especially important in understanding

change. Drawing on various aspects of Wendt, Ruggie and Cox's work, it becomes clear that material factors (whether economic, military, demographic or other) can instigate change. However, they can only become causal factors on the basis of the meanings attributed to them by collectively shared social meanings. In other words, the argument is that change is always mediated by the intersubjective.

Related to this should be the recognition that there needs to be a reconceptualisation of what constitutes material and what ideational factors. For example, Wendt's argument that 'power' and 'interest' are not necessarily material factors, but are instead intersubjectively constituted phenomena, should be explored further.

There are, of course, many dangers associated with a middle ground position. Burnham (1991:78), for example, charges that by according ideas and material capabilities equal weight, one produces "a pluralist empiricism which lacks the power to explain". It follows that "the theory therefore remains fundamentally non-propositional, allocating equal weight to each and any variable". While proponents of the extreme positions will argue along these lines, insisting that their views allow for parsimonious explanations, one could counter that while idealist or materialist arguments are attractive in their simplicity, they may lead to an oversimplification of the complex phenomenon that is change. While parsimonious theory clearly has value, one should avoid citing it as the reason for neglecting either material or ideational factors. Sometimes sacrificing parsimony appears justified in exchange for gains in explanatory strength and depth. And as Cox (1996:53) so aptly states, "One person's elegance is another's oversimplification" (Cox, 1996:53).

Although clearly advocating a middle ground in the materialist-idealist debate[8], and emphasising the need for engagement between contending theoretical approaches in order to provide a satisfactory understanding of change (1997:124-125), Ruggie also remains acutely aware of the potential pitfalls of any such attempts at collaboration. For example, he warns that "the ease with which various theoretical approaches can simply be made additive must not be exaggerated either, because, in some measure, they do embody significant epistemological and even ontological differences. In

particular, ideational factors – principles, norms, identities, aspirations – do not always fit neatly into the mechanical notion of causality and neo-Hempelian explanatory protocols employed in conventional international relations theory" (1997:124)

In other words, Ruggie does not believe that ideational phenomena like intersubjectively held beliefs can simply be plugged into a positivist framework. The reasons he cites are that positivism "lacks the possibility that ideational factors relate to social action in the form of constitutive rules; it is exceedingly uncomfortable with the notion of noncausal explanation, which constitutive rules entail; and it doggedly aspires to the deductive-nomological model of causal explanation even though it is rarely achieved in practice, and at the level of the international system probably cannot be, while dismissing the narrative mode as mere storytelling" (Ruggie, 1998b:884). Here Brglez's (2001:340) view that a middle ground position is easier to find ontologically than epistemologically rings true. Nevertheless, developing an epistemological middle ground should not be regarded as an unattainable quest from the outset. As was discussed in Chapter Three, we need to guard against reinforcing the positivist dichotomy between explanation and understanding by adopting an either/or approach to epistemology. Understanding and explanation should not be regarded as mutually exclusive but instead be recognised as being very different but compatible approaches, both of which are necessary to make sense of what is an enormously complex social world. The proposed stance is thus openness towards epistemological pluralism.

Wendt and Cox are able to provide suggestions in this regard. While Cox is clear about the fundamental differences between positivism and critical theory, he does not regard them as mutually exclusive. This does not mean that he disagrees with Ruggie's assessment of positivism's inability to deal with issues such as intersubjectivity. Instead, he proposes that positivist problem-solving theory can be utilised to address specific issues, while critical theory is required at other times, notably in periods of turbulence and large-scale change. Wendt, similarly, is an

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[8] He writes, "the building blocks of international reality are ideational as well as material" (1998b:879).

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advocate of a pragmatic, dual mode of theorising which involves both causal and constitutive methods. Whilst committing himself mainly to a positivist epistemology, Wendt admits that "answering constitutive questions will require interpretive methods" (1999:85) so, like Cox, his answer to what appear to be irreconcilable epistemological differences is to draw on both, depending on which is most relevant to the issue under investigation. A comprehensive understanding of global political transformation requires a combination of both interpretive and causal explanation methods. While the results of such change may be studied using positivist methods, the process of change requires a different, more interpretive, approach. Taking into consideration the views of our three authors, the call is thus ultimately for a moving away from an inflexible epistemological stance to one that is more accommodating.

Wendt also expresses a certain amount of doubt regarding the viability of a middle ground. While conceding that such a position is desirable, he believes it is "hard to sustain, because materialists will always object to arguments in which the ideational superstructure bears no determinate relation to the material base, and idealists will always object to arguments in which it does" (Wendt, 1999:25-26). To this concern, one could reply with Keohane's (2000:127) question: "But how many relationships in social life are 'determinate'?" He claims that, instead, in reality, ideas and material forces are linked and interact in complex ways. In other words, the issue is not one of "material forces versus ideas" but of what their relationship is. The objective of a true middle ground position should thus be to transcend the false dichotomy between materialism and idealism.

Finally, it must be recognised that a middle ground position does not offer a solution to all problems. As Sorensen (1998:92) points out, it "opens a large agenda of new problems, but even if these are complex and difficult, they are much to be preferred to the unpleasant extremes". Having outlined the advantages and challenges of a middle ground approach to the study of change, we can proceed to explore the broader implications of bridge building approaches.

5.6   Evaluating the success of bridge-building attempts

Despite their differences, the work of Ruggie, Wendt and Cox show that developing a middle ground position in the idealism-materialism debate is possible. Their middle ground positions can also be said to extend beyond the idealism-materialism debate. All three – to differing degrees – can be regarded as theoretical bridge builders. Although critical of neorealism, for example, they have incorporated many of its strengths into a broader, more comprehensive explanatory framework that includes ideational and normative concerns.

The result has been that these scholars are criticised by others who prefer more radical positions for staying too close to the middle ground. Wendt, in particular, has been the target of much criticism for his alleged refinement of realism, and his synthesis between ontological and epistemological approaches that are ordinarily regarded as incompatible. Palan, for example, regards Wendt's bridge building exercises as "rather costly", arguing that, following Wendt's example, "soon enough, no one is truly a non-constructivist" (2000:589).

The contention here is that much of this criticism has been misdirected, as the assumption is that these 'bridge builders' continue to work within the confines of the prevailing ideology. In such cases, of course, Little's (1981:42) charge that this such analysis "will do little more than reinforce or supply an academic justification for change which is designed to maintain the existing status quo" is fully justified. Ruggie, Wendt, and Cox cannot, however, be accused of working within existing frameworks. They do borrow from mainstream approaches and ultimately end up with very eclectic theories, but by mixing together new ideas and concepts, the end results are progressive rather than a reinforcement of the status quo.

George's criticism that the alternatives to realism developed by scholars like Ruggie "do not represent a fundamental break with the dominant discourse but rather an adaptation of it" (1994: 115) is not misplaced. The question we need to pose, however, is whether this is necessarily harmful in terms of the development of IR theory? Ultimately we have to ask ourselves: what is the aim of theorising (in IR)? If we develop such radical theories that other scholars and also practitioners cannot

relate to, are we contributing successfully to the field? It brings us to the age-old dichotomy regarding the most effective way to bring about change - by means of revolution or engagement? If these bridge building scholars are able to build on existing theories and so expand our understanding of the international system and how to change it, is that not laudable? As a case in point, Wendt has been taken seriously by mainstream scholars. Many IR theory courses now prescribe Wendt and students are encouraged to take his proposals regarding ideas and the social construction of the international system seriously. This will eventually filter through to practitioners who – in the end – are the ones with the power to change the world.

In contrast, more radical scholars are regarded with somewhat more scepticism, and have resultantly had little impact on mainstream IR. Schmidt (2002:16) confirms this when he asserts, "While there is little doubt that various post-positivist approaches have contributed to the field's pluralistic character, generated an expansive body of interesting literature, and forced the field to confront a host of new meta-theoretical questions, how large an impact they have made on the mainstream core of the field is still not clear". He continues by noting that realism continues to survive and continues, in a sense, to define the basic assumptions and boundaries of the field. Schmidt believes this is one of the reasons why, of all the available alternative approaches, Wendtian constructivism, which accepts many realist tenets, "is the approach being taken most seriously by the mainstream today".

The reasons why theoretical bridge building is significant for an improved understanding of change are similar to those put forward above regarding why a middle ground position in the materialism-idealism debate is preferable to an extremist position. It should be obvious that phenomena as complex as global change cannot be understood by any single approach. Even Waltz (1986:331) admits that neorealism is merely one possibility of theorising when he writes, "[r]ealist theory by itself can handle some, but not all the problems that concern us". A middle ground approach also has many other advantages. It "allows conversations about theory which are not over-shadowed by either the battle for the only valid paradigm in the Kuhnian sense or the construction of epistemologically opposed camps which agree to disagree because of incommensurable theoretical assumptions" (Wiener, 2001:17).

Although this issue has been considered in some detail in the first chapter, it is important for this discussion to again briefly question the validity of the incommensurability thesis in IR theory. Wight claims that it has become "...an institutionalised assumption, sustained or rejected more by a set of legitimating citations and/or unswerving commitment to difference, than by dynamic engagement with the rationale underlying the assumption" (1996:295). It has furthermore taken on the role of a "protective shield" to be used against attacks from other perspectives. It is important for the aims of this study that the incommensurability thesis not be uncritically accepted, as this would imply that there is no possibility for comparisons and evaluations between nor any integration or synthesis amongst contending paradigms. The approach taken here is that, despite the fact that certain concepts, like 'international system' or 'structure' have different meanings to realists and constructivists, this does not necessarily preclude meaningful exchanges between proponents of the two schools. In other words, despite a lack of common standards and differences relating to objectives, assumptions and methods, communication and valuable exchanges between contending theories is possible. The incommensurability thesis must therefore be rejected if we are to break down the belief that any attempt at engagement between contending schools of thought is futile.

By engaging in bridge building, one is able to retain the strengths of positivist theories like neorealism, whilst incorporating aspects but avoiding the relativism of extreme post-positivist theories (Sørensen, 1998:91). Importantly, it allows scholars to adopt a synthetic position which, "while lacking the elegance of a theory (which may, however prove of little use in empirical research), offers the advantage of being open towards conceptual innovation as the result of discussions" (Wiener, 2001:17). Given these benefits, there should thus be a concerted effort towards moving away from the basic divisions and the reinforcement of existing dichotomies in the field in favour of thinking about the relative merits of potential combinations.

Constructivism has been seen as an attempt at bridge building, at establishing the middle ground between idealist and materialist, and positivist and interpretive approaches[9]. Bridge building is not characteristic of the field of IR which has,

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[9] See, for example, Wiener (2001) and Adler (1997).

instead, been marked by a number of 'great debates'. As Sterling-Folker, quoting Biersteker, notes, "More often than not, rather than generating sophisticated new understandings and/or synthetic new constructions, major epistemological debates have devolved into dismissals of the legitimacy of other approaches and/or mutual incomprehension" (2002:74). In contrast to the more hostile style of discussion that has marked the field of IR since its beginning, the development of constructivism brought with it a new style of engaging discussion amongst theorists belonging to different schools. This has subsequently lead to innovative thinking regarding the possibility of reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable, in other words, collaborations between contending theories.

Barkin, in an article entitled *'Realist Constructivism'* argues that constructivism[10] is compatible with a realist perspective, and that the combination can be helpful in terms of "specify[ing] the relationship between the study of power in international politics and the study of international relations as a social construction" (2003:325). According to him, "a realist constructivism (or, for that matter, a constructivist realism) is epistemologically, methodologically, and paradigmatically viable" (2003:326). He claims that one of the reasons that this has, to date, not been viewed as possible, is the fact that both cast the other side in very rigid terms – and not always accurately so. For many constructivists, realism is the very antithesis of what they are doing. Similarly, many realists have written of constructivism as just another idealist, utopian fancy.

Echoing the thoughts of advocates of a middle ground position in the idealism-materialism debate, Barkin (2003:337) argues that neither realism nor idealism can, on their own, account for change in the international system. Instead, "both an idealist constructivism and a realist constructivism – distinct from, but in a dialectical relationship with, each other – are necessary to account for and explain change in the international system". He outlines the benefits to both, suggesting that the idealist constructivism "would be freed from any perceived need to claim to study only ideas in an attempt to distance itself from the study of ideals" while "the realist

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[10] This applies only to "thin" constructivism (as practised by Wendt and Ruggie); not "thick" or postmodern constructivism.

constructivism would look at the way in which power structure affect patterns of normative change in international relations and, conversely, the way in which a particular set of norms affect power structures".

Another scholar who has entertained the possibility of a collaboration between realism and constructivism is Jennifer Sterling-Folker (2002). She considers the possibility of reconciling the two approaches by identifying commonalties on ontological grounds. On a similar note to Barkin, she claims that "realism and constructivism need one another to correct their own worst excesses" and that "reconciling the two approaches so that both stasis and change in global social order are explained simultaneously seems desirable" (2002:74). This is reminiscent of Cox's proposal that, while problem-solving theory can account for stability in the international system, critical theory is required to explain periods of change.

Sterling-Folker proceeds to point out that a major challenge of any attempt at reconciliation is the need to remain "consistent with what scholars from both approaches consider their core assumptions". It follows that a theoretical collaboration between realism and constructivism can only be successful if an ontological common ground can be identified, (2002:75) something she claims is possible[11]. Barkin and Sterling-Folker's exploration of theoretical bridge building has started to elicit some interest in the field. A recent forum in *International Studies Review*[12] on the viability of developing a dialogue between constructivism and realism is a welcoming sign that the field is taking (small) steps towards crossing what until recently seemed to be impassable divides.

Finally, what it all comes down to is the question: Why, in thinking about the best way to study change or IR in general, does one have to put on a constructivist, a realist, a Marxist or a neoliberalist hat? Wight (2002:40) makes an important point when he laments that the IR discipline "...demands that one declares one's allegiance. Once declared, one's analytical frame of reference is specified and one's identity

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[11] See Sterling-Folker (2002:75-97).

[12] See Jackson, P.T. (ed.)(2004) "Bridging the Gap: Toward A Realist-Constructivist Dialogue" in *International Studies Review*, vol.6: 337-352.

firmly fixed. As a rationalist you will privilege material factors, causation and science; as a post-positivist / reflectivist you will privilege ideational factors, deny causation and are anti-science". Labelling is thus an important tactical move in any intellectual struggle. And when authors like Ruggie, Wendt and Cox rock the boat by not conforming to these predetermined rules of behaviour, they are attacked from all sides, and the discipline is in uproar regarding how to classify them. Wight rightly notes, "The idea that one has to declare which tribe one belongs to and that this determines one's ontological frame of reference, epistemology and appropriate methods seems a bizarre way for a discipline to proceed" (2002:40). Following Cox, the aim should not be "to put people into boxes", but rather "to show how a satisfactory perspective may draw upon several of the main theoretical traditions" (1996:502).

While an IR theory that satisfies all and succeeds in being a 'Grand Theory of Everything' or at least a 'Grand Theory of Change' would, of course, resolve many of the problems raised above, such a perspective is, unfortunately, far from being available. It follows that the study of change in IR remains, by necessity, analytically eclectic. We thus need, as Wight (1996:313) proposes, to view competing paradigms as "mutually intelligible, because they constitute parts, if not of some singular entity, of some potentially unified picture". In response to concerns that excessive bridge building may result in chaos and confusion, we can draw on an insight by Jones. He reasons, "Such eclecticism need not be synonymous with confusion, if analysts maintain an awareness of the limits of the approaches used and if they sustain a concern for precision in concepts and arguments" (1981:11).

Finally, we need to address the apprehension raised by Wiener (2003:256), which questions the eventual effect of a culture of bridge building on IR as a discipline. She asks "whether or not a discipline that is increasingly coined by clustering in the middle ground and hence increasingly losing touch with critical young Turks on the margins can still summons the critical potential that is necessary to scrutinise theoretical assumptions and grasp changes in world politics?" This is clearly a valid concern – after all, the dynamic and progression of a discipline is marked partly by the vigour of its debates and the reverberation of its critical voices. These dissidents

are necessary to ensure that the discipline does not stagnate and continues to ask new questions, and search for new answers to old questions.

Attempts at developing middle ground positions should, however, be viewed in the same light. Like their more radical counterparts, bridge builders are interested in developing alternative positions to the prevailing ones – they simply go about it differently. It must also be said that not all IR scholars will see the value in developing middle ground positions – there will always be those who cling to their respective extreme positions. The point is that, for much too long, this has been the modus operandi of IR – either you join the mainstream, or you become a critical voice on the fringes of the field. There has been a lack of engagement, much of it justified on the grounds of alleged paradigmatic incommensurability. What is required at the moment are more collaborative efforts, more real efforts at cultivating the middle ground. Perhaps in a few decades' time Wiener's fear will have been realised (although it is highly unlikely) and the middle ground will be the new mainstream. It will be up to scholars then to start calling for a return to more radical and diverse approaches to studying change in IR, and IR in general.

5.7   Summation

The objective of this chapter was to show that it is deceptive to try to develop a strict, exclusive dichotomy between material and ideational factors, and that such a dichotomy is especially problematic when it comes to the study of global political transformation. The reasoning behind this is that it is the interplay of these two factors that ultimately brings about transformation.

Following a delineation of the general debate between idealists and materialists, and an exploration of the contributions of our three authors in this context, it was found that all three advocate a 'middle ground' position. The contention here is that such a conciliatory approach aimed at transcending the materialism-idealism debate is a requirement for making a meaningful contribution to the analysis of global political transformation.

An outline of what such a 'middle ground' position might involve suggests that it constitutes a position of theoretical tolerance, and goes beyond merely importing aspects of, for example, ideational approaches into what remain, in principle, materialist explanations. It was found that one of the most important components of a middle ground position should be the notion of intersubjectivity, based on the argument that material factors have no causal relevance independently of the intersubjective contexts in which they exist, in other words, change is always mediated by the intersubjective. Furthermore, although a middle ground position is easier to find ontologically than epistemologically, an openness towards epistemological pluralism appears to provide a possible solution.

In terms of the three authors' contributions to understanding the interplay between power and ideas, it was found that a combination of a constructivist understanding of the role of ideas and Cox's clear acknowledgement of the importance of their material structure will ensure a balanced conception of this interaction.

In the final section of the chapter, the broader implications of bridge building approaches were explored, as it is something which all three authors engage in. In addressing criticism of such an approach, it was contended that bridge building is significant for an improved understanding of change, as phenomena as complex as global political transformation cannot be understood by any single approach. Ultimately, it was argued, collaborative efforts aimed at cultivating the middle ground are what is needed in IR at present.

CHAPTER 6

Evaluating approaches to global political transformation

6.1   An outline of proposed criteria

In Chapter One it was maintained that one way in which theories can be evaluated is on the basis of their (politico) normative contributions to the study of IR. Neufeld (1995:60) notes that Cox's work on problem-solving versus critical theory also highlights the notion that "reasoned comparison of incommensurable approaches is not only necessary but possible, and that it is possible once one extends the grounds of assessment to include the politico-normative dimensions of rival theoretical enterprises".

We need to develop that notion further and ask: what constitutes a satisfactory normative theory of change, and how might one evaluate contending conceptualisations of change? An important reason for comparing and evaluating different studies of change is provided by Cox, who affirms that "achieving a 'perspective on perspectives' is oriented to a specific goal: "to open up the possibility of *choosing a different valid perspective*" (Neufeld, 1995:58, emphasis in original). It needs to be said at the outset that some of the issues raised here are of a complexly philosophical nature. These are issues which a study authored by someone untrained in the philosophy of science cannot make a major contribution to. At the same time, however, these issues need to be brought to the fore, even if only in a rather superficial manner. An attempt was made in Chapter One to explore the issue of incommensurability, and the possibilities of evaluating contending theories. This chapter will therefore not go into further detail on this topic, and the main issues will merely be highlighted again where relevant.

Starting from the assumption that the positivist premise of objectivism must be rejected, we also need to be aware of the dangers inherent in post-positivism. One of them is the danger of extreme relativism. We need to guard against an 'anything goes' approach. This issue is of particular pertinence to the study of change, for as Sørensen (1998:88) rightly asks, "how can post-positivist ideas and projects of change be distinguished from pure utopianism and wishful thinking?" It is therefore necessary to develop some standards by which it is possible to compare and evaluate different theories. As already noted in Chapter One, the criteria that will be proposed here lay no claim to being original. Neither are they objective: they are inevitably rooted in the author's experience and worldview, and guided by her own normative assumptions. They are, furthermore, not to be regarded as an attempt to develop comprehensive, universal criteria for evaluating theories of change. They merely constitute an initial outline of possible criteria that may be adapted by others according to their needs.

Of course a comprehensive assessment of the respective values of different theories cannot purely be based on an evaluation of their normative insights. Criteria such as the explanatory value of the theory must naturally weigh heavily as well. A number of general criteria by which it is deemed theories can be judged include logical consistency, accuracy, falsifiability, and parsimony. The criticism that normative theories cannot be verified or falsified because they rest on value judgements that express certain preferences requires a proper discussion involving meta-theoretical issues that are beyond the scope of the present study. The generally accepted criterion of parsimony has already been discussed in the previous chapter. The conclusion drawn there - namely that the inclusion of both material and ideational factors in analysis may lead to a loss of parsimony, but at the same time adds explanatory value - should be reinforced here. One should not strive for parsimony at all costs, as sacrificing it appears justified in exchange for gains in explanatory strength and depth.

Whilst being aware of the general criteria for good theory, this particular study does not, therefore, attempt to provide an overall assessment of the selected authors' theoretical positions. Instead, it is consciously limited to evaluating studies only on the basis of their contributions to the normative project. As White (1988:8) points out,

however, "How one weighs the normative criterion against the interpretive and explanatory ones will no doubt be a complex matter".

What follows is an attempt to develop a tentative outline of requirements that conceptualisations of change can be measured against. It is asserted that a satisfactory normative theory of change should:

(1) attempt to transcend the false dichotomy between material and ideational factors in change;

(2) be explicit about its normative position: is the normative vision universal or does it promote a particular (e.g. Western-centric) worldview?;

(3) sketch clear and realistic alternatives of how the world ought to be (i.e., exhibit an awareness of what constitutes viable change within the given constraints);

(4) identify sources of change and include a proposed plan of action of how to achieve normative goals.

Let us look at each of these in turn, and explore how our selected authors can contribute to their development.

(1) Attempt to transcend the false dichotomy between material and ideational factors by adopt a conciliatory approach to the materialism-idealism debate.

The rationale for this criterion is that, in order to make progress in thinking about change, one needs to engage constructively with the materialism-idealism debate. More specifically, one needs to recognise the shortcomings of adopting either an extreme materialist or extreme idealist position. Instead, a conciliatory approach needs to be followed. One possible manifestation of such an approach – a middle ground position – was developed in the previous chapter. The middle ground is premised on the notion that our theories about the world always contain elements of ideas and material factors, and that it is especially important to be aware of the effects of both material conditions and ideas on large-scale change – for it is the interplay of

these that ultimately brings about transformation. In order to avoid duplication, this criterion will not be discussed further here.

(2) Be explicit about its normative position

As established in Chapter One, the study of change in IR is an unavoidably normative endeavour, and approaches to change that claim to be value-free are in fact fallacious. Advocating a particular normative position is not in itself problematic, as long as the author is aware of and explicit about her normative assumptions and the normative project she is promoting.

This criterion also refers to an awareness of the particular worldview that one is promoting. Is it, for example, rooted in Western ideas of democracy and liberalism? Notions such as that liberal pluralism is the political arrangement most conducive of the good life need to be uncovered and questioned, or at least recognised as advocating only one of many normative positions. Mittelman (1997:250-251) points out that it is wrong "...to impose Western dichotomies [when thinking about theoretical innovation in conjunction with global transformation] on the Third World and seek to universalise them...Western discussions of International Relations theory are couched in language that embraces Western concepts and Western experience".

This leads us to one of the main limitations in the existing transformation literature, namely that most of the authors who do attempt to address the issue of transformation, do so from an implicit or explicit "northern" perspective, based on the post-material and post-industrial interests and concerns of the citizens of North America and Europe. One could argue, perhaps, that the discipline has not been consciously exclusive, but that its Western bias has mainly been a result of the historical development of the field. As Holsti (1998:28) points out, "For the most part, international politics as an academic field, organized departmentally, existed primarily in English-speaking countries, and its theoretical aspects were developed exclusively in those domains". While the field is now well entrenched in many non-Anglophone countries, both in Europe and the developing world, it continues to be dominated by American and British scholars. The most prestigious journals in the field are all English-medium, and in order to publish in most of them, not only must

one write in English, but one is also expected to project a particular worldview. This, however, is another subject altogether.

Let us explore what our selected authors are able to contribute to the discussion. While it is possible to identify certain normative positions in the work of Wendt and Ruggie, this is implied rather than stated. As noted in Chapter 2, by outlining the possibility of transformation towards an alternative (more peaceful) international system, Wendt succeeds in countering a mainly pessimistic view of world politics amongst mainstream scholars. At most, however, Wendt's normative vision is non-committal. With regard to whether change in the international system can be progressive, Wendt argues that, while there is no guarantee that there will be progression, it is unlikely that there will be regression. "If ever there is no guarantee that the future of the international system will be better than its past, at least there is reason to think that it will not be worse" (Wendt, 1999:311-312) is as far as his normative vision stretches.

At the same time, Wendt has also been criticised for trying to distance himself from a normative approach. He has made little effort to address any of the concerns mentioned above, and consequently some scholars, notably Alker (2000) and Suganami (2002), have expressed scepticism regarding the global appeal and applicability of Wendt's work. Alker (2000:149) argues that Wendt's "homogeneous, almost ahistorical universalism of his theorizing represents an hegemonic, American style that some scholars from former or aspiring hegemonic states can appreciate, but most others will not" and predicts that Wendt's state-centric security focus will not be welcomed by scholars in developing countries. One could thus ask whether Wendt who, at great length, emphasises the importance of the social construction of 'reality' is himself caught in a particular constructed reality, socialised by the North American academic tradition? Global problems such as ethnic conflicts, ecological challenges, global inequalities and various other forms of human insecurity are conspicuously lacking in Wendt's study.

Ruggie can similarly be accused of neglecting to address these issues directly, and of avoiding an explicit statement of his normative position and aims. While his normative leanings are inherent in his social constructivist approach – which, in its

assumption that the international system is socially constructed, allows for the potential for progressive change - this is not something he explores explicitly.

Out of the three authors reviewed in this study, Cox is the only one who is explicit about his normative position. On a number of occasions he makes it clear that his aim is "to discover and encourage avenues of enquiry that might in the long run aid towards the transformation of power relations both within and among nations in the direction of greater social equity" (Cox, 1996:377). Cox is also aware of the desirability and challenges associated with developing a universally applicable vision of an alternative future. In his discussion of a post-hegemonic order, he emphasises this issue, noting the importance of reaching a mutual recognition of the equality of different civilisations and cultures. At the same time, he maintains, it would be necessary to identify common ground amongst these divergent civilisations, in what he calls a move towards "a kind of supraintersubjectivity that would provide a bridge among the distinct and separate subjectivities of the different coexisting traditions of civilizations" (Cox, 1996:152,256).

In summary, therefore, what can safely be said is that a distinct, inclusive perspective on the topic of global transformation remains sorely lacking. In particular, there are too few analyses looking at the process of transformation from a normative position that regards the interests of the citizens of the 'global South' as legitimate and worthy of protection. Dunn (1981:74) also picks up on this point when he speculates that certain analysts "tended to neglect change because they perceive change as undesirable and inimical to 'North Atlantic' interests", in other words, they were inherently biased against change. In comparison, the developing world, despite having launched some attempts at transforming the international system (e.g. the New International Economic Order of the 1960s and 70s) has, to date, been unsuccessful in achieving any type of transformation that would benefit them.

This inevitably leads to the question whether an inclusive perspective is at all possible. If we accept that different paradigms have different politico-normative content and subsequently appeal to different people and promote different political projects, the quest for an inclusive perspective becomes elusive indeed. This touches

on deeper philosophical issues relating to the possibility of advancing global emancipation in a world of cultural pluralism.

Habermas's discourse ethics, which offers a basis for advancing the moral point of view wherever there are clashes of culture or morality, provides a possible solution. It forms part of Habermas's theory of communicative action, which was sketchily discussed in chapter one. Without going into detail, we can briefly highlight the benefits of discourse ethics. First, discourse ethics is universalist in its belief that no individual or group that will be affected by the principle, norm, or institution under deliberation should be excluded from participation in dialogue. Secondly, it is democratic in that it provides a mechanism that can test which principles, norms, or institutional arrangements would be 'equally good for all'. Thirdly, it is a form of moral-practical reasoning which offers normative guidance (Devetak, 1996:172). The development of an inclusive normative exploration of global political transformation thus remains an important issue which warrants urgent attention. Perhaps, with the assistance of Habermas's discourse ethics, scholars from both the industrialised and the developing world can work towards this goal.

(3) Limit visions of alternative systems to what is realistically viable, given existing constraints.

According to Nicholson (1998:78), "The true utopian has a vision of some perfect world which will come about at some point in the future...The modern utopian...aims at improvement rather than perfection". This criterion thus requires a 'modern utopian' approach. By adhering to this requirement, one is able to avoid the pitfalls of extreme idealism and utopianism. As Sørensen (1998:88) points out, "any change project is not possible at any time". Falk (1987:250), in discussing the work of Wolfgang Friedman, refers to such an approach as "practical idealism". He notes that Friedman exhibited a "lively awareness that proposals for global reform must first pass tests of political feasibility to warrant serious attention". In order to develop a model for a feasible alternative system, one would need to know what the existing constraints are, and this requires a thorough understanding of the current system.

Here Cox's critical-historicist approach is informative, as it is based on a comprehensive understanding of both current and historical processes and structures, as well as the origins of the present system. While Cox's approach assumes the possibility of change, this change is deemed to be constrained by historically specific social conditions. In other words, although it is important to conceive of potential alternative world orders, one has to focus on what is practically possible. Cox's critical theory thus rejects "improbable alternatives just as it rejects the permanency of the existing order" (Cox, 1996:90).

Ruggie's approach also demonstrates a solid historical awareness, which allows him to apply historical processes of change to the current situation in order to predict the source and outcome of future change. For example, based on what he regards as a pivotal role played by the development of the single-point perspective in the creation of the state system, he argues that, given current developments, a future global political system will be one based on multi-perspectival practices and authorities.

While Wendt's work is not as historically sound as that of Cox and Ruggie, he is nevertheless able to limit the direction of transformation to what he regards as the inevitable next phase in the state system – namely a Kantian culture, in other words an international system in which states regard each other as friends. Both Wendt and Ruggie's ability to realistically assess the possibilities of change is, however, constrained by their apparent disregard for the role that power relations between states can play in shaping the direction of change. One could also argue that Wendt's vision of the future is perhaps too limited. His model only allows for changes in the identities of states within the prevailing system, while other possible alternatives remain unexplored.

While evaluating approaches to change according to whether the alternative frameworks they conceive of can emerge plausibly from the existing arrangement of social forces thus seems to be a valid criterion, it must also be applied within reason. As Nicholson (1998:79) points out, one problem about change is the high degree of unpredictability about the future of the international system. If we consider the number of unforeseen developments which had a tremendous impact on the international system during the twentieth century (nuclear weapons, computers and

the subsequent information/communication revolution), it is only obvious that the next century will most likely entail similarly momentous developments which are, as yet, impossible to foresee. Visions of the future thus need to be both feasible and flexible.

(4) Identify sources of change and include a proposed plan of action of how to achieve normative goals.

This criteria refers to what Linklater (1986:310) describes as "an outline of an emancipatory practice, or what writers in a different tradition have termed 'strategies of transition'" and Falk et al (1982:4) call "transition tactics and pathways". In other words, what is being assessed here is whether approaches to change are able to identify the mechanisms of transformation, and include recommendations for action.

Wendt argues that changing intersubjective understandings lead to different cultures of anarchy that vary in their propensity for conflict. In terms of the mechanisms of change, Wendt focuses on the creation and reproduction of identities, maintaining that states can and have transformed the culture of anarchy through interaction and identity. Interaction between states can lead to a redefinition of the self (Ego) and the other (Alter), and role-taking between states can either lead to a reproduction of actors' existing views of self and other, or a transformation of the shared ideational structure. Wendt notes, however, that cultural change requires not only that identities change, but that their frequency and distribution cross a threshold at which the logic of the structure tips over into a new logic. As has been noted before, one is however left with questions regarding what actually induces identities to change. As Ringmar notes, "...the *sources* of change still are left unaccounted for. What is missing from this framework is quite simply a convincing theory of action" (1997:276). Also, Wendt does not provide any explanation for when the 'tipping point' is reached, or how it can be reached.

Ruggie argues that changes in social epistemology played an important role in the rise of the state system, in other words "the mental equipment that people drew upon in imagining and symbolizing forms of political community itself underwent fundamental change" (1998a:184). He identifies a number of factors, including

religious principles, linguistics, and the invention of the single-point perspective, and proceeds to argue that similar changes in intersubjective understandings will bring about changes in the current system. Specifically, such a transformation would involve that people view the current form of organising political space as being inadequate to deal with today and the future's challenges. The role of society's ability to *imagine* new forms of political organisation is thus an important factor enabling change.

Cox explicitly addresses the question of the motive force for change. According to him, an explanation for why the system changes can be traced to the realm of social forces (1996:140), with change being the result of conflicts inherent in the prevailing situation. In considering the potential alternative futures of the state system, Cox sets out requirements that would have to be fulfilled for each of the scenarios to be realised. A nonhegemonic world order would, for example, involve "the ascendancy in several core countries of neomercantilist coalitions", while a counterhegemony would require "a power sufficient enough to maintain a challenge to core countries" (1996:114-115).

None of our three authors, and other transformative writers, however succeeds in setting out a plan of action, a strategy that can be followed by agents who have an interest in global political transformation. Because of this shortcoming, the transformative literature has not been of much use to policy makers and activists who pursue fundamental change in the international system. While reform-minded policy makers and post-Seattle activists can associate to differing degrees with the visions of a transformed world presented by the likes of Wendt, Ruggie and Cox, their strategic thinking is anaemic and confused partly because of poor guidance coming from the available theoretical literature. To take one example: many observers see the liberalisation of capital markets as one of the fundamental features undermining state autonomy, and thus as one of the harbingers of a post-state system. Should proponents of fundamental change support this or not, given the fact that it can also be argued that this liberalisation entrenches patterns of privilege and power, and that far from transforming the state system, it is only enhancing the gaps between the rich nations of the world and the poor? This is but one of many difficult questions facing

reform-minded decision-makers today (see Nel, Taylor and van der Westhuizen, 2001).

6.2   The state system: facilitating or inhibiting progressive global transformation?

A further example is the question relating to the preservation of the state system. Is the process by which state autonomy and state sovereignty are being eroded, a liberatory process in terms of transformation, and should it therefore be encouraged? Or is the state still the best guarantor of democratic decision making and a primary developmental agent? Should reformers strengthen the state, or should we rather view the state, as an institution, as one of the main obstacles to transformation? If the state (still) has liberatory potential, how should this potential be used?

Ultimately, the question has to be asked whether the normative goal of progressive change and global emancipation can be advanced within the prevailing system – i.e., whether the state system is morally preferable to another system such a world state within the context of global political transformation. This is significant because, as Lacher (2003:521) notes, "The critique of state-centrism is a crucial aspect of the restructuring of International Relations theory, widely seen as a precondition for the conceptualisation of international transformation".

The contention here is that all three of our authors are in agreement, to different extents, that fundamental global political transformation can occur within the existing state system. It must be emphasised that this does not mean that they rule out change which will take us beyond the state system. In this sense these writers stay within the realist framework of the state system, although, as Wendt notes, realists do not have a monopoly over state-centric theorising. This is in contrast with other transformative writers who are in favour of a world state or other form of post-Westphalian order, and regard the state system as being part and parcel of current global problems. As Wapner (2000:9) points out, for many scholars involved in normative IR studies, the state is seen as either "unwilling or unable to assume the task of political reform as they envision it". Given the globalised character of many political problems, they are beyond the reach of the state. Falk et al argue, for example, that, given the apparent

inability of the existing system of territorial sovereign states to meet challenges of peace and justice, "it seems appropriate to envisage preferred world order systems – that is, frameworks that seem more likely to realize world order values" (1982:3). Falk goes even further to claim that "the state system inclines the world toward destruction; that no way to arrest these self-destructive tendencies is implicit in the traditional forms of statecraft" (1982:155).

Regarding the ability of states to advance moves to greater equality, Linklater (1990:99-100) notes Tucker's[1] observation that demands for redistribution of wealth from the developed to the developing world is often made by states on their behalf. However, he proceeds to point out that an increase in equality among states may be compatible with a continuing inequality among individuals within states. In fact, it may even lead to an exacerbation of inequality within states. So, ideally, a global redistribution of wealth would not only address the inequalities between states, but would have to target the poorest of the poor in the developing countries. Some state-centric theorists may argue that we are venturing outside the international realm and into the territory of domestic politics. This, however, seems inevitable given our set goals of global human emancipation. Here we need to turn to critical international theory, which, according to Devetak (1996:168) "seeks to facilitate moral and political community not just by extending it beyond the frontiers of the sovereign state, but also by deepening it within those frontiers. It is concerned with overcoming intersocietal estrangement and establishing a system of general political security based on universal emancipation" (Devetak, 1996:168).

Despite his criticism of the state, Falk concedes, "Beyond the central reality of the state being too big and too small there is no prospect of an adequate political framework, alternative to the state system, that can be seen realistically emerging in the next few decades...the intensification of statism is among the most important political developments of our time" (1987:281). This relates to the criteria stipulating that normative visions of change must be realistic, and take into account the constraints imposed by the existing system and circumstances.

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[1] Tucker, R.W. (1977) *The Inequality of Nations.* New York: Basic Books (p.61).

The other side of the coin is, therefore, the view that the state system will continue to exist, and that this does not rule out progressive global political transformation. Higgott (2001:148) suggests three reasons for the continued importance of states. They are representative of much work which has been done on the issue of the continuation / demise of the state system. States remain the most important actors in world politics because:

- NGOs and other non-state actors do not enjoy the legitimacy of the state as the repository of sovereignty;

- non-state actors are less democratically accountable than states;

- decisions taken in global decision-making bodies rely on the compliance of states for their implementation.

One could also argue that states remain the most efficient producers of power and wealth.

It must be emphasised that one need not be uncritical of the current state system to realise that states and interstate relations remain the principal sites of global politics. As Linklater (1990:119) notes, even "the founders of critical social theorising did not regard the system of states as an insurmountable obstacle to the realisation of human emancipation". One needs also to recall Wendt's comment that, while neorealism might not be able to explain structural change, this does not mean there is not potential for the development of an alternative state-centric theory that can.

Although there has been much talk in academic circles about the desirability to move beyond the state system in order to advance normative goals such as addressing global inequalities, there is much less evidence that this is what is desired on the ground – by those in whose interests these normative goals are meant to be. Many developing states that only achieved independence during the second half of the twentieth century, for example, are justifiably suspicious of schemes advocating a world state. These proposals are of Western origin and thus can be regarded as attempts to erode their sovereignty in the interests of the West. Similarly, Leysens's study (2002) shows how the marginalised people in the southern African region still regard the state as being the form of political organisation that can address their problems. In fact, Frost claims that the preservation of the society of states can be regarded as a

'settled norm'[2] in IR. He is quick to point out that "The claim here is not that everybody actively promotes this as a goal, but that no significant group of actors in world politics acts contrary to this in the conduct of international affairs without invoking special justifications". He proceeds to note that those (such as developing state) who are of the view that the current world order is unfair "do not so much call for the abandonment of the system of states (requiring that it be replaced by a world government, for example), but argue for certain modifications to the system. In particular, they demand a new system for the distribution of wealth between states" (Frost, 1996:106). It thus appears that what they are calling for is not a replacement or even a transformation of the state system, but merely additive or incremental change.

One can thus say that, although globalisation and other trends have changed the global environment, ultimately states retain power (albeit in a different form). As Krasner (2001:20) maintains, globalisation has "alter[ed] the scope of state authority rather than [to] generate some fundamentally new way to organize political life". He argues, in a similar vein to many other scholars, that states have faced many different challenges, and that now they are better able than ever to respond to the challenges posed by globalisation. The changes that we are witnessing may thus be taking place within the state system. They include changes in the rules and norms that regulate the international system. These would be the types of changes referred to by Wendt when he discusses how the changing identities of states can lead to a different type of anarchy, a different type of system – although it remains one in which states are the most important actors.

Whilst it is important to explore changes in and of the global system that involve moving beyond the state system, we need to reconsider the criteria requiring future alternatives to be feasible. Given the conclusion drawn above that states are not on their way out – on the near future, in any case – IR scholars may need to (re-)shift their focus to the possibilities for normative change within the state system.

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[2] Frost (1996:105) defines a settled norm as follows: "I shall regard a norm as settled when it is generally recognized that any argument denying the norm (or which appears to override the norm) requires special justification ... I am not claiming that most people (or states) do in fact obey that norm".

Let us turn to our three authors to explore their contributions to this issue. As previous chapters have proven, their ultimate aims and objectives do not necessarily coincide. While Wendt is more of an abstract theorist, Cox's approach is much more hands on, with Ruggie somewhere in between. Put differently, in terms of their normative vision, Wendt and Ruggie can be regarded as reformists (in other words, they envision a more incremental system change) while Cox is more radical (he believes that fundamental change in the nature of global politics needs to be brought about). However, following Frost (1996), we can develop a channel of communication between them in order to facilitate conversation if we establish some kind of common context.

Frost proposes identifying what he calls a relevant *domain of discourse*, referring to "an area of discussion within which the participants generally recognize (and recognize others as recognizing) many rules as settled (Frost, 1996:78). He argues that one such area of agreement or domain of discourse in IR is that of the modern state system. According to him, "Even those questions which point towards the creation of a new order in the world (one which might not consist of states) must prescribe what states and citizens ought to do now in order to move towards a new world order. Similarly, some questions which on the face of the matter do appear to apply to states, for example questions about the proper role of multinational corporations, may, on closer consideration, be shown to be concerned with states" (Frost, 1996:79). The contention is therefore that "all normative issues in world politics today refer, either directly or indirectly, to the state, inter-state relations and the role of individuals as citizens of states" (1996:79)[3]. In summary, he counters the claim that "normative argument about pressing issues in international relations is not possible because the basic consensus (which is a precondition for *any* argument) is lacking..." (1996:84).

We can utilise this domain of discourse to engender conversation between Ruggie, Wendt and Cox. Despite their differences, they are in agreement about the possibility

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[3] Frost foresees two objections to his proposition: firstly, that no area of agreement exists in IR, i.e., that contending theories have incommensurable views and in practice there is little political consensus; and secondly, that there is such an area of common ground, however, it is not the state system, but rather the community of humankind (which is independent of the state system).

of fundamental global transformation occurring without necessarily involving the demise of states. As already mentioned, a recognition of the continued importance of states does not imply an uncritical stance, nor one which is committed to the maintenance of the status quo. Frost argues, "We are not condemned to critical impotence if we accept that the answer to the pressing normative issues in international relations must necessarily be found within the modern state domain of discourse" (Frost, 1996:89). Let us now turn to the views of our three authors on the preservation of the state system.

While Ruggie admits that the state is "...increasingly playing international roles that involve a greater degree of collective legitimation that is not traditionally associated with the Westphalian model..." (1998b:876), he does not agree with scholars who contend that the state is becoming irrelevant in the face of global developments and alternative forms of global authority. At the same time, just because these new forces and actors are not replacing states, one cannot simply ignore their influence, and the potential they have for changing the international system. While Ruggie emphasises the effects of an "unbundling of territoriality", such as states' increasing loss of authority, this does not have to imply that states have to disappear altogether. Ruggie's vision of a more multiperspectival form of political organisation is compatible with the continued existence of states, next to an increasing number of other actors. For Ruggie, fundamental global political transformation could thus entail that the current state system has lost its efficacy and is replaced. However, it could also mean that the particular form of organising political space – in the current system, mutually exclusive sovereign states, or the concept of territoriality – is "fundamentally modified" (1998a:172).

Wendt's conceptualisation of change is very clearly confined to the state system. Some critics have claimed that Wendt's normative vision is restricted due to the fact that he limits himself to working within the existing framework of the state system. Wendt also specifically addresses the issue of the demise of the states system by noting how resilient the state is. According to him, no matter how increasingly important transnational non-state actors are becoming, or how much state autonomy is undermined by globalisation, states continue to succeed in reproducing themselves. Additionally, he claims that while "non-state actors are becoming more important

than states as initiators of change ... system change ultimately happens through states" (1999:9). His explanation for the continued existence of states is based on his argument that the Westphalian state system is characterised by a Lockean culture or logic. He argues that his conception of a Lockean culture as one where powerful states are constrained by norms that preclude them from killing weaker states, explains the continued existence of many weak states.

There have been arguments to counter this reasoning, notably Krasner's 'organized hypocrisy'[4] hypothesis. Krasner argues that many of these weak states have not in fact been autonomous "in the sense that their domestic political institutions have been determined by independent choices of actors within their own polity, even if they are accepted as having equal standing in international law" (2000:132). His term 'organized hypocrisy' refers to the claim that while rules and norms, like sovereignty, can be longstanding and widely recognised, they are also frequently violated. He summarises this by saying "Weak states have had formal juridical independence, but not *de facto* autonomy" (2000:132). He claims that empirical evidence points to the fact that powerful states have, for hundreds of years, dictated or constrained the domestic institutional arrangements of weaker states. He continues by saying "The rule of non-intervention has not been honoured in the breach, it has been persistently challenged by alternative norms including the protection of human and minority rights, the importance of fiscal responsibility and the need for international stability. These alternative norms, especially minority rights, have been embodied in every major international agreement..." (Krasner, 2000:132).

Wendt responds by saying that, while he accepts Krasner's argument that the norms of sovereignty are not nearly as sacrosanct in modern state practices as some scholars hold, he continues to be "impressed with the power of the institutions of sovereignty." He points out that sovereignty remains the basis of international law, and remains the sole basis for membership in the United Nations. He concludes that "...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" (2000:177).

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[4] See Krasner, S. (1999) *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Returning to our question regarding the relationship between fundamental global political transformation and the state system, Wendt makes a very important contribution. He argues that advocating non-state-centric theorising on the grounds that the state is inevitably tied to centralised authority is a false assumption. He notes that while "in the Westphalian system state agents and authority structures did coincide spatially...the two concepts need not correspond in this way". In other words, he is asserting that change of a fundamental nature – including the shifting of power to other actors, and the reconceptualisation of political authority is possible without necessarily involving the complete demise of the state system. "Political authority could in principle be international *and* decentralized, and most importantly, that it is possible to conceive of such change within the confines of state-centric theorising" (Wendt, 1996:59).

Whilst acknowledging the role of non-state actors, the changing role of the state, and the possibilities of a post-Westphalian system, Cox also does not suggest that we are witnessing the demise of the state. Despite its name, Cox's vision of a post-Westphalian global order envisages a multi-level system consisting of a complex of political-economic units, in which states remain as one kind of actor. Similarly, structures of authority will continue to include the state level, but will be also be extended to include the macro-regional and micro-regional levels (Cox, 1996: 245, 263, 308, 517). Cox also focuses on the notion of change in state forms – in other words, instead of giving up their positions of power, states are adapting to changing global conditions. Similarly, Cox's vision of a post-hegemonic order also does not coincide with the death of the state system. He argues that counter-hegemonic forces could consist of either non-state actors, such as new social movements, or of states, or of both.

If we accept Falk's categorisation of Cox as a critical realist, we also accept his assertion that critical realists "are not biased towards either continuity or discontinuity [of the state system] ... nor do they, as is the case with advocates of world government, hold the conviction that the only path to a desirable future for humanity is to dismantle the state system (1997:54). Similarly, a Gramscian approach "offers no promises nor prescriptions for the form that [a future] society might take" (Gill,

1993c:25). Furthermore, while Cox has expressed pessimism with regard to the potential for transformation within the current state system, noting, "It seems that very little can be accomplished towards fundamental change through the state system as it now exists" (1999:27), one could interpret this as implying that change would be possible within an altered state system, and not only in a post-state system.

Ultimately, whether we regard fundamental global political transformation as being possible within the state system depends on our definition of what constitutes a state and a state system. If we adopt a definition of the state system as one based on exclusive authority centred in one type of actor – the state – then we are witnessing the demise of the state system. If, however, we adopt a more flexible conception, it is possible to view the state system as continuing to exist, but in a different form, with states losing certain 'traditional' roles but gaining others.

An associated issue raised by Frost relates to the 'language' or vocabulary used to analyse change. According to him, there is no other suitable language by which to practice IR but that of the state system. He maintains that "whatever proposals for piecemeal or large-scale reform of the state system are made, they must of necessity be made in the language of the modern state. Whatever proposals are made, whether in justification or in criticism of the state system, will have to make use of concepts which are at present part and parcel of the theory of states" (1996:89-90).

This is a contentious issue. While there are good reasons for accepting the state system as the current framework of IR, and therefore as a starting point for any discussion of change, this should not rule out the development of an alternative vocabulary aimed at transformation. Here one might be reminded of Ruggie's comment that we lack even an adequate vocabulary to talk about transformation in the international system (1998a:174-175). This view is shared by Maclean (1981:41) who points out the dangers of working within the existing discourse when he maintains, "When a social scientist operates within the confines of the prevailing ideology, then very often the resulting analysis will do little more than reinforce or supply an academic justification for change which is designed to maintain the existing status quo. If the social scientist wishes to see the system transformed then an essential prerequisite will be to identify an alternative and competing set of ideas". Part of this

involves broadening one's understanding of concepts like the 'international system'. The underlying rationale is that it becomes virtually impossible to conceive of a future international system differing in form from the one which we have become accustomed to over the past few centuries when we limit our understanding of the concept international system. How can we talk about future world orders, future international systems when our definition of an international system is virtually synonymous with an (inter)state system? As established above, this does not, however, have to mean that we discard the state system in totality.

What is being asserted here, in contrast to Frost's position, is that IR theorists should not remain constrained by the language of the dominant state-centric discourse. Instead, there should be a conscious effort to introduce new concepts into the discipline. Drawing on Ruggie, it must be kept in mind that often the first step towards change is imagining change. And, of course, imagination is closely linked to the ability to conceptualise change.

6.3   Summation

This chapter has attempted to provide a tentative answer to the questions: what constitutes a satisfactory normative theory of change, and how might one evaluate contending conceptualisations of change? It was conceded at the outset that a comprehensive assessment of the respective values of different theories cannot purely be based on an evaluation of their normative insights, but that this study would consciously limit itself to evaluating studies only on the basis of their contributions to the normative project. The following outline of requirements that conceptualisations of change can be measured against was proposed. A satisfactory normative theory of change should: (1) attempt to transcend the false dichotomy between the role of material and ideational factors in change; (2) be explicit about its normative position; (3) sketch clear and realistic alternatives of how the world ought to be; and (4) identify sources of change and include a proposed plan of action outlining how normative goals can be achieved.

As noted in the first chapter, the criteria developed here lay no claim to being original. The notion that authors should be explicit about their normative position is, for

instance, based on an extensive foundation of philosophical work. The suggestion, however, that it is only through developing an ontological middle ground position in the idealism-materialism debate that one can truly advance the study of change in IR was developed directly out of the work of the three authors. The aim was thus to select from, adapt and apply existing criteria to the study of global political transformation.

In terms of the second criterion it was established that, while Cox is explicit about his normative preference, Ruggie and Wendt's normative assumptions are implied rather than stated. With regard to the third criterion, Cox, Wendt and Ruggie, to differing degrees, succeed in limiting their visions of future world orders to what, according to their conceptions of change, constitute viable alternatives. Similarly, in terms of identifying sources of change, Wendt and Ruggie do identify a number of factors, but they are not as explicit as Cox in addressing the driving forces behind change. None of the three authors, however, succeed in developing a concrete strategy by which normative goals can be achieved. In summary, both a distinct, inclusive perspective on the topic of global transformation and a plan of action remain lacking in existing conceptions of global political transformation.

With regard to the question whether the normative goal of progressive change and global emancipation can be advanced within the prevailing system, it was concluded that all three of our authors are in general agreement that fundamental global political transformation can occur within the existing state system. Furthermore, it was noted that one need not be uncritical of the current state system to realise that states and interstate relations remain the principal sites of global politics, and that IR theorists should not remain constrained by the language of the dominant state-centric discourse.

Having critically evaluated the work of our three selected authors - Wendt, Ruggie and Cox - and applied our findings to the issues raised in Chapter One, it is important to reflect on the conclusions that have been drawn. This leads us to the final chapter, which will summarise the findings of this study and the contributions made to the theory and practice of international relations, as well as identify issues for future research.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion

7.1   Summary of conclusions and suggestions for future research

This study has attempted to make some contribution to what is a vastly complex topic – that of change in and of the global political system. To this end, it is inevitable that a number of issues requiring in-depth exploration have only been touched on, while new issues warranting attention have come to the fore. It is therefore hoped that this study will serve as a foundation on which future investigations in the field can be based. Some areas requiring further research will be outlined below.

The study has been of a mainly evaluative nature, and has sought to achieve a number of things, mainly centred on addressing three shortcomings identified in the existing change literature: the fact that the role of ideas and the normative implications of change have been sorely neglected, and the need for criteria by which one might choose between contending normative projects.

It was contended in Chapter One that the field of IR is unavoidably normative, and that IR theorists should be explicit about their normative positions. Although this is a call that has reverberated through the hallowed halls of IR scholarship for at least a decade, it still appears to be falling on deaf ears. It thus warrants another repetition. The bulk of the study consisted of a critical review of three authors - Alexander Wendt, John Gerard Ruggie, and Robert W. Cox – that was focused on their contributions to the study of change in IR and, in particular, the identified research foci.

The final two chapters dealt with the tension between materialist and idealist explanations of change, and the challenge of developing criteria for evaluating approaches to change. In Chapter Five the aim was to develop an integrated answer to the question concerning the role of ideas, and the interplay between ideas and material factors in change. It was concluded that in order to contribute gainfully to the study of change in IR, an approach that attempts to transcend the false dichotomy between materialism and idealism needs to be adopted. It was further argued, in conjunction with the contributions of our three selected authors to this issue, that a middle ground approach is the most appropriate and viable way in which to address the materialism-idealism debate and in doing so, facilitate the study of change. Furthermore, the value of theoretical 'bridge building' was explored and it was found to be a welcome development to the field of IR, especially in terms of developing a more comprehensive theory of change. While there are some valid concerns regarding the dangers of excessive bridge building and middle ground approaches, the contention here is that such approaches are what is needed in the field of IR at the moment. In line with the belief in theoretical reflexivity, scholars should be aware of the dangers but not be discouraged to engage in cross-paradigmatic projects. It is hoped that an increasing number of IR theorists will see the value in engaging across what have, to date, been regarded as untransversable paradigmatic waters.

There remain, however a number of thorny ontological and epistemological issues which need to be explored in greater detail in order to establish a true middle ground position, both in terms of the materialism-idealism debate, and more broader efforts at theoretical bridge building. Much of this work needs to be done at the level of the philosophy of science, and it is hoped that IR scholars with a firm grounding in that field will take up the challenge.

Starting from the premise developed in Chapter One that one way in which theories of global political transformation can be evaluated is on the basis of their (politico) normative contributions, four criteria were outlined in Chapter Six. It was proposed that a satisfactory normative approach to the study of change in IR should, at a minimum, fulfil the following requirements. It should:

(1) aim to transcend the false dichotomy between materialism and idealism;

(2) be explicit about its normative position;

(3) exhibit an awareness of what constitutes viable change; *and*

(4) identify sources of change and include a proposed plan of action of how to achieve normative goals.

With regard to the second criterion, it was found that a distinct, inclusive perspective on the topic of global transformation remains sorely lacking. More work thus needs to be done to develop analyses that approach the process of transformation from a normative position that regards the interests of the citizens of the 'global South' as legitimate and worthy of protection. It was found that Habermas's discourse ethics might provide an instrument by which a more inclusive perspective on change can be reached. It is hoped that this interdisciplinary challenge will be taken up by scholars equally comfortable working in the fields of philosophy and IR.

With regard to the fourth criterion, it was suggested that while criticism is an important aspect of normative work, a further step also needs to be taken in the form of prescribing action to improve global conditions. In other words, what is required is a plan of action to aid reformers or activists interested in transforming the system. This criterion is closely related to the first one, for if scholars are more explicit about their normative position, this allows them to become more than independent observers of the international system. It allows them to become 'organic intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense. In other words, they can become participants in and valuable contributors to the process of global transformation. This then also constitutes a call to IR scholars working in the field of change to develop their arguments within the context of the global political reality and the real challenges to achieving global political transformation and emancipation.

Following on from the criterion relating to the viability of proposed alternative normative visions, the question of whether the state system inhibits or is able to facilitate progressive global political transformation was explored. The conclusion drawn was that progressive fundamental global political transformation need not imply the demise of the state. It was also noted that, although there has been much talk in academic circles about the desirability to move beyond the state system in

order to advance normative goals such as addressing global inequalities, there is much less evidence that this is what is desired on the ground – by those in whose interests these normative goals are meant to be. This again relates back to the second criterion, namely whose interests are ultimately being promoted by particular normative projects?

The following questions remain: Is the state still the best guarantor of democratic decision making and a primary developmental agent? If the state (still) has liberatory potential, how should this potential be used? In whose interests would a post-Westphalian system be? It should be clear that each of these questions warrants its own research project, and the urgency of guiding global transformation in the right direction (in other words, one which will lead to a more equitable and just world) makes these questions pressing ones.

Finally, it must be noted that the criteria identified for evaluation in the previous chapter constitute only a proposed outline. Much more work is required in developing these and additional criteria, especially in terms of embedding them in a strong philosophical foundation.

7.2   Theoretical and policy implications

The importance of developing a strong theory of global political transformation should be obvious. Buzan and Jones assert that, "without such theory it is impossible to make systematic and generally meaningful assessments of the significance of change. In the absence of theory, significance arises only from the vested interest of the observer in relation to the event observed. This is neither a sound basis for policy-making, nor a path to higher levels of understanding" (1981:4). Adler similarly highlights the implications for progressive global political transformation very explicitly when he notes, "without explanation there can be no emancipation" (2002:107).

Some form of critical theory, understood in its broadest sense, is required, as it succeeds in "reconnecting the theoretical knowledge to human socio-political interest" and "it opens up the otherwise foreclosed debate on the construction of

'reality'" (George and Campbell, 1990:549). In other words, it serves to highlight the existing constraints, and to suggest the potential for transformation and emancipation. It does not automatically lead to emancipation in the sense of the transformation of existing structures, however. In that sense, as Neufeld points out, even if "...theorizing is itself a form of practice necessary for emancipatory struggle, it is, nonetheless, a form of practice that can never suffice on its own" (1995:xi).

In line with the fourth criterion proposed in the previous chapter, the contention is that, despite advances on the theoretical field, more needs to be done to connect theoretical innovations with practice. As was noted in the previous chapter, a plan of action or a strategy that can be followed by agents who have an interest in global political transformation remains absent. Of course it is important to first develop a strong theoretical foundation, for as Buzan and Jones maintain, "Weak theoretical approaches to international relations both reflect, and contribute to, an inability to manage change in international relations effectively". Good theories are essential as they not only influence actors' views, they also highlight the consequences of actors' perceptions and actions. Theories are bound to play a crucial role in decision-making, whether implicitly or explicitly (Buzan and Jones, 1981:5).

Thinking about what the future holds in terms of possibilities for global political transformation is therefore not only an interesting intellectual project. It is of the utmost importance to political leaders and policy-makers. For how can one make effective policy if one is unable to foresee potential future developments that could have an impact on the foundations on which international relations to date has been based. Those who practise international relations often look to theorists to help them conceptualise complex concepts like transformation, and to provide them with guidelines for action. The findings of this study, despite being focused at the theoretical level, are thus not without practical significance. It is hoped that they will contribute not only to a better understanding of global political transformation, but will also potentially influence the conduct of those involved in the practice of international relations. The jury is not yet out on what a future international system will look like, who the main players will be, who will yield the most power, or whether it will be a more just, equitable system. What theorists and political leaders need to realise is that the outcome is not completely out of their hands.

Finally, we need to return to the three authors who have served as conversation partners in this endeavour. Despite their differences, they have all contributed to different aspects of this study. Wendt, as a conventional, modernist or thin constructivist, advocates the view that the main goal of social science is explaining social reality. Ruggie, coming from a more interpretive approach, focuses more on the understanding of change. Cox, as a critical theorist, sees the main goal of social science as facilitating emancipation from oppressive structures. According to him, theory should thus be regarded as a tool for improving the world. Together, they, and other theorists from different paradigms, can contribute towards the development of a more comprehensive theory of global transformation. It is only through dialogue and engagement that we can arrive at a satisfactory theory of a 'better' world.

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