http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8795-156X
Eva Michaels
Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI)

Renewing Realist Constructivism: Does It Have Potential as a Theory of Foreign Policy?[1]

Abstract: This article raises the possibility of de- and reconstructing realist constructivism for the purpose of studying foreign policy, with an emphasis on explaining and forecasting change and continuity. I discuss why Samuel Barkin's explication of realist constructivism has in my view struggled to take off as an IR perspective and which tenets appear problematic, especially when applying them to foreign policy. I suggest a way of revitalising realist constructivism across three layers of theorising: political ontology, explanatory theory, and praxis. Constructivism's "open ontology" offers a meeting point with classical realism, together with its (less deterministic and more interpretivist) explanatory approach. Classical realism adds to the third layer with its focus on practice sensibility, including the choices actors make in highly uncertain contexts. Its strong interest in discovering the truth of politics is important here. I argue that such a synthesis, which is informed by Ned Lebow's conceptualisation of causation as "inefficient", could be well-suited to unpack the complex reality of foreign policy. I seek to make the case for realist constructivism as a dynamic thinking tool, among others when investigating the effects of material, intersubjective and subjective factors on foreign policy decisions and outcomes. While my propositions can only be sketched here, the goal is to encourage further debate about the value of realist constructivism, which has ebbed since the mid-2000s.

Keywords: realist constructivism, classical realism, constructivism, foreign policy, practice, inefficient causation

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1. Introduction

This article discusses how a novel reconciliation of constructivist and realist assumptions might remedy shortcomings in existing explications of realist constructivism, with the specific aim of providing a compelling perspective for the explanation and forecasting of foreign policy, rather than prescribing strategy. It re-engages with "modernist" constructivism, inspired by Emanuel Adler, to highlight that constructivism could fill in more of the analytical narrative of realist constructivism than has to date been suggested. Classical realist insights on actors and practice, especially by E.H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau and Raymond Aron, could improve realist constructivism further, prompting it to engage more directly with the world. While classical realism pays special attention to foreign policy prescription, its discussion of diplomatic-strategic conduct provides equally relevant pointers when seeking to explain and forecast foreign policy. Overall, a realist-constructivist synthesis appears well suited to revisit praxeology (Aron, 1973) as a theory of human action by showing how the social world is endogenous to foreign policy practice.

A logical combination of ontological assumptions would bring in constructivism's focus on historically contingent possibilities of human imagination and the reality of intersubjective knowledge while realism adds attention to nation states and their leaders whose transhistorical human characteristics and tendencies matter to their decision-making. This may remedy constructivism's preoccupation with "presentism" as well as realism's "transhistorical complacency" (Sterling-Folker, 2002, p. 76). Due to its open ontology, constructivism struggles to theorise the conditions under which we can expect change and continuity in ideas and social practices (Sterling-Folker, 2002, p. 75). This is where collaboration with classical realism comes in: its insistence on limitations at the level of individual decision-makers (centred on human cognitive psychology and the tendency of group formation) implies that the social construction of reality occurs within the parameters of these human nature attributes. Constructivism does the "heavy lifting" for the explanatory approach within realist constructivism: within the inevitable context of groupism, human beings construct contingent social reality, which shapes their ideas and interests. The latter are difficult to end cognitively and materially. At the same time, social reality allows for the possibility of individual agentic creativity.[2]

Turning to the third layer, classical realism leads when theorising praxis in realist constructivism. With its intention of analysing the whole of reality (Carr, 1940, p. 13; Aron, 1973, p. 326), judging theoretical assumptions on empirical and pragmatic grounds (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 3) and conceptualising practice

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as human conduct with attention to the beliefs of foreign policymakers (Carr, 1940, p. 126; Aron, 1973, p. 325), classical realism offers valuable and coherent avenues for researching practice.[3] It acknowledges that irrational elements are at play, which may "deflect foreign policies from their rational course" (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 7). It is thus not per se tied to the logic of consequences and in my view not incompatible with the logic of practicality (Pouliot, 2010, p. 11–13). Constructivism's attention to practice theory opens up thinking space for how the social worlds of policymakers influence political practices, specifically their judgements and decision-making, and not just their ideas and identities (e.g. Adler, 1997; McCourt, 2016, pp. 481–482; 2022).

While a renewed realist constructivism could speak to various interlinked concerns in IR, such as reflexivity or the historical and temporal turns, I focus on its contribution to practice sensibility in foreign policy. The practice turn provides helpful discussions of foreign policy, attention to the microfoundations of IR, and a re-appreciation of material conditions together with insights into how the material and ideational worlds are interwoven (e.g. Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, 2014; Ty and Steele, 2017). Yet its promise of facilitating effective dialogue between different "isms" and opening new research agendas has not been sufficiently exploited for the study of foreign policy. For instance, Ekengren (2018), who discusses the European Union's (EU) responses to the crises in Kosovo in 1999 and Haiti in 2010 through a practice theory of translocal action, argues vehemently against explanations from a realist or constructivist perspective. He reduces both theoretical approaches to "interests" and "norms" and claims that the "gap between these theories and the empirical reality of EU foreign policy actions has been widening over the years" (Ekengren, 2018, p. 2). He dismisses, among others, the contribution that constructivist research on transnational agency in EU foreign policy has made (e.g. Howorth, 2004; Cross, 2011). Rather than exploring how conversations between IR perspectives could contribute to more complete explanations of foreign policy with special emphasis on competent practices, practice theorists tend to caricature the underlying assumptions of traditional IR theory (Economides, 2019, p. 494).

As Jørgensen and Hellmann (2015a, p. 6) suggest, positions on theoretically informed reconstructions of foreign policy practices ("necessary, useful, irrelevant or even counterproductive") might well "relate to the question of how abstract and/or parsimonious IR theory and/or foreign policy theory ought to (or must not) become". This under-exploration seems partly due to the continuation of an uneasy relationship between those who pursue a specific approach within the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) – with a narrow emphasis on individual decision-makers and processes – and those who focus more broadly on purposive behaviour and outcomes (Jørgensen and Hellmann, 2015b). Tensions

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3   See also: Troy, 2021.

between IR theory and the study of foreign policy have long hindered theory integration, a transcendence of traditional levels of analysis and multi-method research (Hudson, 2014). Meta-theoretical debates in IR as well as classical approaches in FPA often reinforce the (mis)conceptions that research needs to be grounded in either individualism or holism, that explanatory primacy needs to be given to either structure or agency, and that structure is shaped by either material conditions or psychological-cognitive stimuli or social ideas. These tensions are far from necessary. Accepting them can prevent us from asking whether theory captures the interlinkages of the real world of foreign policymaking, and whether a combination of different ontological and epistemological assumptions can yield additional insights.

Calls for pragmatism in IR have long been growing louder and have prompted attempts at theoretical cross-fertilisation. Yet these have rarely been translated into clear assumptions and tend to focus on international politics, with little indication of whether and how they apply to foreign policy. This criticism is partly valid for realist constructivism. Scholars have recently applied it to foreign policy (Michael, 2018; Martin, 2019; Boyle, 2019; 2020; Bano, 2020; Delacour, 2020; Wei, 2020). All of them, apart from Boyle (2019; 2020) and Wei (2020), draw on Samuel Barkin's (2003; 2010) understanding of realist constructivism and do this relatively uncritically. They focus on links between shared ideational factors (norms, values, identity) and power structures.

The empirical application of realist constructivism has, apart from Sjoberg (2020) and Guzzini (2020) in the same edited volume, not triggered the dynamic scholarly response that Barkin's (2003) first discussion or earlier calls for enhanced dialogue between realism and constructivism (e.g. Sterling-Folker, 2002) received. Little theoretical knowledge has been added to the debate since Barkin (2010) presented an updated discussion, adding to the impression that interest in realist constructivism has waned since the mid-2000s.[4] This is regrettable as realist constructivism has significant potential for problem-orientated research across IR including foreign policy. This article discusses what a renewed realist constructivism could offer. A first section engages with some of Barkin's core assumptions, specifically regarding the value of constructivism and the incompatibility of social and individual logics. A second section reviews the constructivist ground from which a novel combination could start and highlights the value of a revived engagement with classical realism. A third part discusses how such a synthesis could be operationalised for the purpose of studying foreign policy. It draws on Ned Lebow's approach of "inefficient causation" to identify theoretical entry points and suggests that individual and social activity can be causal mechanisms for foreign policy change or continuity. While this article is a theory

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[4]   For some recent discussion, see Gow (2017); Schmitt (2018); Sjoberg (2020); Guzzini (2020); Barkin (2020); Prieto (2020).

note, the final section is intended to sketch how a renewed realist constructivism could be applied empirically.

2. Constructivist realism: Power politics, intersubjectivity and foreign policy prescription

Since the late 1990s, more attention has been paid to areas of overlap and agreement between rationalism and constructivism.[5] Some scholars have taken this further by discussing the potential of a realist-constructivist IR perspective. This effort was kick-started by Ned Lebow (2001, p. 559), through his claim that "Thucydides is both a realist and constructivist". Jennifer Sterling-Folker (2002, p. 74) provided crucial input by arguing that "[r]ealism and constructivism need one another to correct their own worst excesses" and by highlighting common ontological ground. The subsequent debate has mainly been shaped by Samuel Barkin but also by those who have discussed Barkin's initial propositions and have argued from different angles how a realist-constructivist synergy could add value in IR.[6] These scholars did not seek to downplay the differences between the two research programmes but suggested that false tensions have been created. Some of them departed from constructivism, others from realism, and they agreed that both perspectives need to continue to coexist. As Barkin has provided the most comprehensive explication, I review his work and refer only occasionally to other early proponents of a realist-constructivist synthesis.

Barkin (2010, p. 163) calls for theoretical pluralism, arguing that "any given approach is unlikely to be by itself a sufficient basis for research". He highlights three main compatibilities between classical realism and constructivism: a grounding in the logic of the social, reflexivity, and consideration of historical contingency (Barkin, 2010, p. 166). Barkin focuses on the relationship between power politics and intersubjective productions of ideas and practices. He defines realist constructivism as "a constructivism in which a concern for power politics, understood as relational rather than structural, is central" and "one in which the links to social policy (including, but not limited to, foreign policy) are made clear" (Barkin, 2010, p. 169).

Key tenets of Barkin's realist constructivism would in my view benefit from further discussion, especially when exploring its applicability to foreign policy. I disagree with Olivier Schmitt's claim that Barkin's realist constructivism *is*

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[5]   For early discussions, see Checkel (1997); Fearon and Wendt (2002); Jupille et al. (2003).

[6]   See Barkin (2003; 2004; 2010; 2020); Bially Mattern (2004); Jackson and Nexon (2004); Lebow (2004); Sterling-Folker (2004); Sjoberg (2020). Early efforts led to two workshops at Georgetown University in April 2005 and the Mershon Centre for International Security Studies in January 2006.

a theory of foreign policy.[7] This leads to my first point of critique: *the scope of Barkin's propositions could have been clearer and more relevant for explanations of foreign policy*. Barkin (2010, p. 7) argues that classical realism brings a focus on foreign policy to the synthesis, but only for prescriptive purposes. This is introduced as a central element, together with a classical realist emphasis on power politics and a constructivist focus on the co-constitution of structure and agency. He defines the scope conditions of realist constructivism as being "only applicable to a subset of questions in international relations, those that look at the social construction of public policy, particularly foreign policy, in international politics" (Barkin, 2010, p. 8). Yet this claim remains vague. Barkin (2010, p. 74, 167) distinguishes between constructivism's focus on explanation and realism's focus on prescription. He highlights the value of classical realism through its emphasis on prudence, morality, and relative power (Barkin, 2010, p. 126). Barkin does not seem interested in the development of propositions that might explain foreign policy and it remains unclear whether and how constructivism adds guidance to discussions of foreign policy. Given the lack of discussion of how realism and constructivism inform each other here, it proves challenging to understand the following: "[i]n discussing foreign policy prescriptions, and the limits of power implied by their prescriptions, realists often in fact sound constructivist" (Barkin, 2010, p. 171).

This critique is linked to a second point: *Barkin undersells the value of constructivism, and it is questionable why he starts from it for his synthesis*. As Jackson and Nexon (2004, p. 337) argue, Barkin reduces constructivism to "a cluster of research methods and analytical tools". They conclude that "Barkin's arguments amount to a call for a 'constructivist realism' [...] rather than a 'realist constructivism'" although it is the latter which "provides a better basis for promoting both a dialogue within constructivism and a dialogue between constructivism and realism" (Jackson and Nexon, 2004, p. 338). As Sterling-Folker (2004, p. 342) sees it, Barkin relies so extensively on classical realism "that ultimately it is not clear whether constructivism is contributing anything that cannot be derived from classical realism alone". Barkin (2010, p. 3) argues that "constructivist research [understood in terms of epistemology and methodology] is as compatible with a realist worldview as with any other [...], and that the realist worldview in turn can benefit from constructivist research methods". Realist constructivism would therefore be "a more methodologically and conceptually rigorous version of what many realists claim already to be doing" (Barkin, 2010, p. 171). Barkin (2003, p. 338) defines constructivism as "a set of assumptions about how to study

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7   Schmitt (2018) makes this argument in the context of reconstructing Raymond Aron's Peace and War as a theory of foreign policy rather than a theory of international politics. Guzzini (2020, p. 204) notes that Barkin's realist constructivism "informs a realist foreign policy strategy and morality based on a prudential check on power".

politics", rather than "a set of assumptions about how politics work".[8] He argues that the latter perspective is paradigmatic and that such an understanding of constructivism would be incompatible with other "paradigms" including realism (Barkin, 2003, p. 338). Yet this seems to undermine his call for theoretical pluralism: while Barkin (2010, p. 154, 166) argues that realism and constructivism can reinforce each other but not be subsumed under the other, constructivism becomes subsumed by classical realism. I agree with Jackson and Nexon that Barkin's propositions amount to a constructivist realism and that the value of constructivism for explanations of politics deserves more attention.

Third, while this seems a central element of the synthesis, Barkin's (2003, p. 326) *discussion of constructivist epistemology remains vague*. It revolves around the understanding that "an identifiable reality exists out there and can be accessed through empirical research". Barkin (2003, p. 327) does not explain how it can be accessed, and his reason for focusing on the neoclassical[9] version when arguing for realist constructivism is: "because it is the more difficult case to make". For Barkin (2010, p. 46, 166), constructivism and classical realism are epistemologically compatible because of their emphasis on historical contingency. This does not sit well with his claim that classical realism brings an exclusive focus on (transhistorical) prescription. It would have been helpful to elaborate more on whether and how social *and* material aspects are to be explored, whether causal mechanisms can be identified or whether the background knowledge is solely used to understand shared meanings and the constitution of processes.

Fourth, while Barkin's definition of realist constructivism centres on power as a social phenomenon, *his conceptualisation of power suffers from a neglect of constructivist insights*. He acknowledges the value of constructivism by arguing that it draws on broader conceptualisations of power than realism and that the two perspectives are compatible (Barkin, 2010, p. 48, 168). This makes it again surprising why Barkin (2010, p. 169) defines realist constructivism in realist-centred terms. While it is an important classical realist argument that power can have many forms, to be understood in relational rather than structural terms, and that material capabilities are only one element of power, these insights can also be generated from constructivism – with the added bonus of exploring the social construction of power.[10] Further, as Guzzini (2007, p. 31) highlights, "constructivist theories tend to understand power as both agential and Intersubjective (including non-intentional and impersonal power)". Barkin (2010, p. 169) acknowledges that constructivists "study power as a tool of policy by

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[8]   Barkin (2010, p. 26) seems to contradict this elsewhere: "the core concept that connects all of these [constructivist] definitions is a focus on the social construction of international politics".

[9]   Barkin (2003, p. 327) distinguishes between "neoclassical" and "postmodernist" constructivism. From the next section, I will be using the term "modernist" instead of "neoclassical", based on Adler's (2002) differentiation.

[10]   See, for instance, Guzzini (2007); Adler (1997, p. 336; 2012, p. 125).

actors in international politics, be those actors individual or corporate". However, his understanding of realist constructivism does not allow for an exploration of subjective aspects of power.

This brings me to my last and most difficult point of critique – difficult because many will argue that this link cannot be established: *Barkin dismisses the possibility of integrating individual-level factors into the synthesis.* His argument that we cannot theorise agency in realist constructivism has little substance and value when using theory for explanatory purposes, but admittedly this is not what Barkin set out to do. There is, however, a tension between Barkin's call for multidimensionality and his claim that the meaning of constructivism would be lost if subjective elements were included (Barkin, 2010, p. 164). Constructivism's logic of the social is, according to Barkin (2010, p. 167), incompatible with the logic of the individual. Intersubjectivity is obviously distinct from subjectivity, as Barkin (2010, p. 28) underlines: "[p]eople must hold ideas or discourses in common, rather than just hold them individually". However, constructivist notions of intersubjectivity build on the idea of individual interactions and it is hard to see why these logics cannot be combined. Barkin (2010, pp. 116–117) acknowledges this relationship, arguing that the concept of co-constitution "implies that human nature is agentive as well as social", thus combining the constructivist logical of the social with "an acceptance that individuals can act agentively". This tension also becomes apparent when Barkin (2010, p. 157, 160) argues that "constructivism does require assumptions about human nature" and that there is considerable ground for cross-fertilisation between constructivist and psychological-cognitive approaches but that theoretical bridge-building is "misleading and distracts from the useful tension along this dimension". Further, Barkin (2010, p. 102) proposes a narrow definition of agency to investigate "behaviours that individuals purposively choose to undertake, behaviours that are affected by but not determined by the structures, social or biological, within which actors find themselves".

Barkin (2010, p. 102) understands agency "as part of the intersubjective". He argues that one can only theorise "space for agency" (within social structures) and theorise structure, but that "one cannot reasonably make the sort of general statements about agents that one can about social structures" (Barkin, 2010, p. 100). Given that Barkin is aware of the limits of constructivism, why would he not draw on classical realism to try and theorise agency? After all, classical realism can provide insights into personality, leadership, judgement, prudence and other subjective aspects. Barkin (2010, p. 117) claims that classical realism cannot theorise individual agency due to its grounding in the logic of the social and that any attempts at adding such insights would lead to mutually contradictory assumptions in realism.

Barkin's position is based on an understanding that the co-constitution "cannot tell us how agents will behave, what agents will say, with respect to social

structures in the future" (Barkin, 2010, p. 111). However, a subsequent statement suggests that he might not seek to use theory to predict (in the sense of making general statements) but rather to forecast future developments (in terms of identifying likely trajectories and making contingent generalisations): "Constructivist logic thus allows us to predict structure into the (near) future in a contingent way, but does not allow us to predict agency even to this point" (Barkin, 2010, p. 111). An emphasis on forecasting would appear more logical, given that attempts at predicting future developments go against the logic of constructivism and classical realism, as Barkin (2010, p. 127, 150) notes. The value of the co-constitution of structure and agency for explanatory purposes, which generally drives constructivist research, is not discussed by Barkin apart from a vague reference (Barkin, 2010, p. 167). This is regrettable as this, and classical realist insights on subjective factors, could have led to a more comprehensive and relevant conceptualisation of agency in Barkin's realist constructivism.

I shall try to reflect on these tensions in the next section but the terms of combining constructivism and realism in general (as well as for the specific aim of explaining and forecasting foreign policy) will need much more space than is here provided. The next section discusses how constructivist and realist insights could contribute to a renewal of realist constructivism.

3. Rethinking realist constructivism for the study of foreign policy

Among the many contributions Barkin has made, he opened up thinking space for alternative conceptualisations in IR. His goal was to "create a set of permissive conditions for a realist constructivism", which he "understood as a general approach rather than as a specific theory" (Barkin, 2004, p. 349). The idea was that "students of international relations could use [this] rather than have to make the case themselves that the two are not incompatible" when creating various realist-constructivist combinations (Barkin, 2004, p. 349). While I am a big fan of Barkin's conversation between constructivism and realism and in awe of the efforts that went into his explication, I believe it might be worthwhile to de- and reconstruct realist constructivism. This appears relevant for the research need identified here (focus on foreign policy) but also to develop a general theory of realist constructivism. Realist constructivism has broader implications as it is about how social reality becomes constructed along the determinative lines provided by groupism and human cognitive psychology. As such, it could also be used to explain change and continuity in world politics and domestic affairs.

Modernist[11] constructivism's perspective on IR offers a useful point of departure for a realist-constructivist synthesis. Why am I returning to Emanuel Adler as an early constructivist rather than draw on what David McCourt (2016; 2022) labels "New Constructivism"? As I will outline in this section, I find Adler's (1997; 2002) early constructivism especially helpful when engaging in dialogue with classical realism. He offers the broader version that the "New Constructivism" recently called for and was among the first proponents of practice theory, hereby preparing much of the ground that constructivism's practice-relational turn seeks to cover.[12]

Let's start at the layer of ontology, which informs explanatory theory. Constructivism can provide helpful epistemological and methodological guidance, but what is more important is its open ontology (Sterling-Folker, 2002). Jackson and Nexon emphasise that "[c]onstructivism is inherently about the way politics operate; it entails claims that any given set of political relationships stem […] from contingent combinations of social agency" (Jackson and Nexon, 2004, p. 338). Yet they also caution that "constructivists have a far more indeterminate view of how international politics work than realists or liberals" (ibid.). Given that constructivists have an even more indeterminate view of foreign policy, how can constructivist ontology add value? I claim that the co-constitution of structure and agency can, if consolidated, provide crucial guidance for the study of foreign policy (as well as international and domestic politics).

Alexander Wendt (1999, p. 11) who integrated the co-constitution into constructivism never intended for it to be applied to foreign policy. But Wendt's position is not modernist.[13] By adapting Anthony Giddens' structuration theory to IR, Wendt incorporated some of its inherent problems, specifically Giddens' "methodological bracketing" (of either structure or agency) together with his suggestion that it proves near impossible to simultaneously trace agential and structural dynamics in any given situation (Hay, 2002, p. 120). Given that the co-constitution gives equal ontological status to agents and structures if we follow Wendt's (1987, p. 339) understanding, this would at best lead to the practice of alternating between agential and structural accounts which, as Hay (2002, p. 120) argues, "can only belie the sophistication of the structurationist ontology". More often, constructivists follow structuralist logics and pay insufficient

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[11] See footnote 9.

[12] I am not drawing on Adler's recent book *World Ordering* here. I do not find it as useful and straightforward as his early constructivist work for my research purpose. It reads at times too normative (in defence of liberalism, which clashes with classical realist scepticism), at the expense of providing analytical guidance. Much space is given to communities of practice and evolutionary change. While this could be complemented with insights on sudden change, limitations to communities and individual actors, *World Ordering* appears too focused on the meta-level of social processes to inform realist constructivism.

[13] For a discussion, see Hay (2002, p. 19).

attention to agential explanations. Individual-level factors are not part of the constructivist episteme (of collective ideas) and are often ignored (Legro, 2000, p. 256). The microfoundations of structure are also often neglected in constructivist approaches. Whereas modernist constructivists emphasise the existence and concurrent effects of social and material realities, they fail to specify the latter and tend to focus exclusively on social-ideational factors (Meyer and Strickmann, 2011). As a consequence, while taking the notion of mutual constitution as a given, constructivists have a hard time operationalising the relationship between structure and agency.

Adler's constructivism seeks to overcome these shortcomings. His perspective stands out due to his efforts of bridging holism and individualism and materialism and idealism, and his openness to theory integration – making it particularly suited to link to classical realism. Adler reflects upon inconsistencies in constructivist research, specifically the critique (Fierke, 2007, p. 172) that its epistemology "rests on a separation between an external world and the internal thought process of individuals" and "fails to sufficiently problematize how the individual level is constituted". According to Adler (1997, p. 327), intersubjectivity "neither assumes a collective mind nor disavows the notion that individuals have purposes and intentions". He highlights the role of individual judgements, interpretations, and beliefs in the shaping of knowledge-based, purposive interactions (Adler, 1997, p. 325). Shared meanings are more than the aggregation of individual beliefs but "not sufficient cause for action" (Adler, 1997, p. 339). Rather, individual agents act in accordance with their interests and identities, but domestic and international politics may prevent them from embarking on a specific course of action. By adopting a reflexive actor perspective and highlighting the interplay of social and individual cognitive evolution, Adler (1997, p. 339) offers a conceptualisation of the co-constitution which helps trace political practices more adequately than the vague structurationist underpinnings of many constructivist accounts.

His perspective is based on pragmatism which dismisses the notion that scholars need to choose between relativism and objectivism (Adler, 1997, p. 328). This is compatible with classical realism's philosophical ground.[14] Adler's (1997, p. 328ff; 2002, pp. 97–98) epistemological position targets the middle ground between the material and social world and positivist and interpretivist patterns of enquiry. He argues that constructivist research agendas can easily be broadened and deepened, which presents IR scholars with "the first real opportunity to generate a synthetic theory of International Relations since E.H. Carr […] laid its foundations" (Adler, 1997, p. 323). He underlines the importance of integrating intersubjective, subjective and material dimensions, and makes many plausible propositions of how constructivists can solidify their arguments

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through theoretical cross-fertilisation and interdisciplinary pathways (Adler, 1997, p. 323; 2002, p. 110). In later work, Adler (2012, p. 120, 135) specifically endorses the possibility of dialogue with realism and calls for a constructivist theory of politics.

Where does Adler's constructivism leave us as a starting point for a realist-constructivist synthesis? While constructivism generally highlights the reality of intersubjective knowledge and processes as well as contingent possibilities of human imagination, Adler shows how its ontology is indeed open. Intersubjective knowledge exists alongside individually held beliefs, perceptions, goals and judgements. Social knowledge and processes as well as individual actors are intertwined and central to reality. And so is the material world, which can resist rather than bow to action. The social world is not only marked by possibilities but also limitations: domestic and international constraints can prevent agents from pursuing a specific course of action.

This lays the groundwork for the first two theoretical layers (ontology and explanation), which can be strengthened by integrating classical realist insights. Adler's constructivism focuses on social practices while giving space to individual actors. Classical realism can theorise this space further. Actors' tendency to form groups and their dispositions, and intentions matter to their decision-making. These human nature characteristics bring further limitations, which can also help explain change in ideas and practices. The contingent social construction of reality occurs within the parameters of groupism and human cognitive psychology. If the latter change (e.g. new groups are formed, or new decision-makers arrive and their cognitive frames of reference are different to their predecessors' frames, or existing decision-makers experience cognitive change and/or display behavioural change), this can modify individual and shared ideas as well as collective practices. At the same time, classical realism does not simply focus on responses to stimuli, which would be informed by a structuralist logic, but emphasises individual agentic creativity.

Classical realism adds most value when theorising praxis. Christian Bueger (2022) recently called for more creative theorising in practice theory, especially in the form of experimentation. I consider classical realism particularly useful when "thinking through theory as practice" (Bueger, 2022, p. 66), and experimentation within a realist-constructivist approach appears indeed intuitive and sensible.

The following brief overview discusses in more depth what classical realism can bring to the synthesis. Classical realism is a dynamic, contextualist, and problem-driven theory. It emphasises contingency, seeks to evaluate questions on a case-by-case basis and relies on inductive reasoning – thus eschewing prediction and the illusion of efficient causation.[15] Classical realism introduced

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[15]   For a detailed discussion see: Lebow (2003, p. 258; 2007, pp. 241–252).

a greater practice sensibility long before IR adopted practices as a category of analysis.[16] Classical realists see the world as it is, not as they would like it to be, and adapt their insights accordingly (Carr, 1940, p. 14; Morgenthau, 1960, p. 3; Aron, 1973, p. 326). This includes acknowledging the reality of power and understanding that one's own power is limited – which can prompt policies of restraint and accommodation.

At the same time, classical realists argue that "it would be useless to define the objectives of states by exclusive reference to power, to security, or to both" (Aron, 1973, p. 324). Morgenthau (1960, p. 9) underlines that interests and power considerations depend "upon the political and cultural context within which foreign policy is formulated". He suggests that processes of socialisation shape state behaviour (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 33ff). Carr (1940, p. 118) highlights that political action is also based on ideals: "any sound political thought must be based on elements of both utopia and reality" as "pure realism can offer us nothing but a naked struggle for power which makes any kind of international society impossible". Aron (1973, p. 324) calls for attention to the foreign policy executive: "no one understands the diplomatic strategy of a state if he does not understand its regime, if he has not studied the philosophy of those who govern it". Morgenthau (1960, p. 415) points to the challenge of securing sufficient public support, among other societal pressures, and emphasises that collective commitments in international security may run counter to national interests. Attention to constraining versus permissive elements in foreign policymaking is particularly helpful (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 9, pp. 33–34, 415).

For centuries, classical realists have argued that foreign policy trajectories are uncertain as political leaders can choose between alternative actions, despite anarchy and power influencing state behaviour.[17] This leads us to pay more attention to the actors who decide upon specific courses of action. The notion of prudence implies that their choices can be wise despite being risky – for instance if they achieve foreign policy successes by challenging domestic or international constraints (Morgenthau, 1960, p. 169; Aron, 1973, p. 324). Classical realism's attention to human cognitive psychology contributes to a better understanding of the idiosyncratic context in which political leaders perceive opportunities and pressures and engage in policymaking. It is informed by the ontological assumption that human nature characteristics affect individual and collective political

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[16]   For instance, Clausewitz observed: "In European politics it has been usual for states to pledge themselves to mutual assistance […] not so far that the one takes part in the interests and quarrels of the other, but only so far as to promise one another beforehand the assistance of a fixed, generally very moderate, contingent of troops, without regard to the object of the war, or the scale on which it is about to be carried on by the principals" (Clausewitz, 1873, book 8, ch. 6a).

[17]   For instance, for a discussion of unpredictability and non-linearity in Clausewitz's work, see Beyerchen (1992).

practices.[18] Yet classical realism is unable to trace the evolution of social contents and give account of social reality – this is where constructivism's explanatory theory comes in.

One related aspect needs to be raised, albeit only in the margins. While realists have been drawing on psychological insights for decades when generating propositions regarding foreign policy (Goldgeier and Tetlock, 2001, p. 69), it has barely been discussed whether there is indeed an "ideational alliance" between constructivism and political psychology as Shannon and Kowert (2011) have argued. This is insofar surprising as psychological insights on foreign policy have foreshadowed constructivist research on foreign policy (Houghton, 2007, p. 31). But it is also unsurprising: mainstream IR theory is too often removed from real-life questions, and challenging established ways of doing things is unpopular. As such, we can probably not expect an answer to the question upon which logic subjectivity and intersubjectivity may be combined. Further, there tends to be limited interest in mainstream IR theory to engage with the historical roots of research programmes: classical realist texts can be claimed as foundational texts for constructivism (Lebow, 2001; 2003; 2007), which is a clear anchor point for realist-constructivist dialogue.

4. Applying realist constructivism to the study of foreign policy

I shall begin this final section with a return to my ontological assumptions and quick discussion of the underlying philosophy of science and finish it with the methods that could be used when seeking to evaluate realist-constructivist claims. Regarding ontology, constructivism highlights the existence of intersubjective knowledge, but realist constructivism needs classical realism's assumption that nation states and their leaders are as real and that their dispositions and intentions matter. My approach is informed by an understanding that classical realism gives explanatory primacy to agency while also allowing for a structuralist logic (agents respond to stimuli). It is further informed by an understanding that agential accounts are bracketed in constructivism: while claiming to give equal ontological weight to agency and structure, constructivists prioritise structure. They theorise space for agency but cannot fill this space – Adler's constructivism included. However, classical realism can. It adds the general statement that agents tend to form groups but also act creatively individually.

Turning to the philosophy of science or methodology, this ontological combination rests on a commitment to the co-constitution of structure and agency. I suggested earlier that if consolidated within realist constructivism, this could

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18   For a discussion, see Sterling-Folker, 2002, p. 75.

provide crucial guidance. I leave it to the reader to judge whether consolidation can happen along these tracks or whether the co-constitution is one of these matters (Jackson, 2016, p. 37) which simply cannot be settled. I appreciate Jackson's comment that "IR scholars ought to change their wagers when appropriate, but in practice, few do" (Jackson, 2016, p. 37). This article invites constructivists and realists who seek renewed conversation to rethink their wagers – and push for more thinking space. The realist constructivism suggested here is based on the methodology of critical realism. It is informed by what Jackson calls "mind-world dualism" (separation between researcher and the world)[19] and "transfactualism", or "the possibility of knowing things about in-principle unobservables" (Jackson, 2016, p. 40). This involves underlying commitments about:

- the *status of knowledge* ("best approximation to the world's that we have") and *procedure for evaluating claims* (controlled investigation or transcendal argument; Jackson, 2016, p. 219);
- the *understanding of causation* ("dispositional properties of objects", with context-dependent manifestations) and *procedure for causal explanation* (so-called INUS conditions that are "Insufficient and Non-redundant but part of a complex that is Unnecessary but Sufficient" to cause an outcome; Jackson, 2016, p. 220);
- the *type of comparison* (contrasting, with the aim of showing how various dispositional properties play out in the world and may have enabling and constraining effects) and *purpose of comparison* (shed light on causal powers rather than general laws).

These commitments, together with the ontological assumptions, would inform the research design of a renewed realist constructivism.[20] Three potential approaches come to mind when seeking to operationalise a realist-constructivist synthesis for the purpose identified here. The first two do not align sufficiently well with the theoretical and methodological suggestions made here but shall briefly be discussed as they appear promising on the surface.

Carlsnaes' (1992; 2012) tripartite approach to explaining foreign policy behaviour advocates theoretical and methodological pluralism, follows an interpretive epistemology, highlights material and social factors as well as a direct link between structure and agency. Carlsnaes divides agency into a dispositional and intentional dimension and perceives structure as very powerful, prompting him to privilege structures over actors and denying that the latter have effects on the former. As such, his approach does not foresee the possibility of mutual interaction between structure and agency and is, in his own words, "logically static"

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[19] As Jackson (2016, p. 39) explains, this can also include a "stance on a set of social relations, since this simply means that those social relations are thought to exist in a more or less determinate way separate from the investigator's scholarly research activity".

[20] There may well be space for a positivist grounding of realist constructivism, but I do not find it helpful for the purpose of this study.

(Carlsnaes, 2012, p. 318). One further aspect makes the tripartite approach unsuitable: while Carlsnaes (1992, p. 263; 2012, p. 318) views foreign policy actions as continuously constrained or enabled by structural conditions, he seems to follow the positivist quest for efficient causation.

Bob Jessop's strategic-relational approach, and Hay's discussion of it, are instructive in some regards, for instance the notions that structure and agency are simultaneously present and interwoven in any context and that "agents both internalise perceptions of their [strategically selective] context and consciously orient themselves towards that context in choosing between potential courses of action" (Hay, 2002, p. 129). However, the resolute refusal to privilege either structure or agency and the argument that a distinction is purely analytical (Hay, 2002, p. 134) is unhelpful for my purpose. By understanding foreign policy decisions through the prism of reflexive actor perspectives and arguing that decision-makers can, to a certain extent, ignore or challenge constraints in their social worlds, I need to allow for a prioritisation of agency over structure while acknowledging the centrality of the latter and its mutual constitution with agency when explaining and forecasting foreign policy outcomes.

Lebow's approach of "inefficient causation" appears most useful when seeking to understand the aggregation of foreign policy behaviour and outcomes from a realist-constructivist perspective. While our understandings of causation arguably depend on the subjects under study, Lebow (2014, p. 44) argues that our desire to organise information in terms of efficient cause and effect is a futile effort to make the world more predictable which often obstructs a more sophisticated understanding of reality. His suggestion to "look for the mechanisms and processes that may be responsible for the outcomes we observe" and to understand that the "contexts [in which these mechanisms and processes operate] determine the effects they have" provides crucial guidance (Lebow, 2014, p. 44). Lebow (2014, p. 65) proposes a "multi-step process that involves searching for connections between and among [potential] causes at multiple levels of inquiry". This implies evaluation through within-case process tracing and cross-case comparison. Rather than producing a complete causal map, such an approach helps develop a complex understanding of most likely causes of specific behaviour and outcomes (Lebow, 2014, pp. 66–69). "General understandings […] do nothing more than provide initial entry points for narrative construction" (Lebow, 2014, p. 45).

While I cannot elaborate much due to space constraints, Lebow's approach encourages us to do the following: we could use a renewed realist constructivism to identify entry points for a reflexive and nuanced approach that would help us to construct narratives of foreign policy. A first entry point could be that the social world is endogenous to foreign policy practice by both collective and individual actors, which includes the understanding that social reality provides space for individual agentic creativity. A second entry point could be that

the social construction of reality occurs within the parameters of the human nature attributes of human cognitive psychology and groupism. Such entry points could lead to the tentative argument that social and individual activity can be causal mechanisms for change and continuity in foreign policy.

Regardless of which pattern of inquiry and techniques for data collection and analysis are chosen, these need to be suitable to try and identify mechanisms and processes that account for context-specific foreign policy. Abductive inference as a means of generating conjectures appears particularly helpful. Its link to critical realism entails that the existence of some process or mechanism is posited which allows for the gathering of additional evidence to take "the explanation out of the conjectural realm and allow[s] scientific researchers to solidify the claim that their posited objects really exist" (Jackson, 2016, p. 95).

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed why realist constructivism has to date struggled to take off as an IR perspective and would benefit from a renewal. In my view, Barkin's realist constructivism suffers from the following tensions, especially when seeking to apply it to foreign policy: the scope conditions could have been clearer and more relevant for explanations of foreign policy, the value of constructivism for the analytical narrative is undersold, the discussion of epistemology remains vague, the conceptualisation of power suffers from a neglect of constructivist insights, and Barkin dismisses the possibility of integrating individual-level factors into the synthesis. Admittedly, some of these tensions are hard to dispel. Also, I have not reflected on them equally in this paper but have instead suggested a de- and reconstruction of realist constructivism across (and within) three layers of theorising: ontology, explanatory theory, and praxis. This was complemented by a methodological discussion, in which I rooted realist constructivism in critical realism.

My efforts were sparked by an interest in exploring why realist constructivism has fallen short of its ambition to better account for change in world politics and foreign policy than realists and constructivists and what might be done to remedy this. In my reading of it, Barkin's realist constructivism has remained too much at the meta-level and is too vague to provide useful theoretical guidance. I have suggested tentative propositions of how realist constructivism might be renewed, but much more effort and space is needed to fine-tune this. My aim was to think about ways of providing more comprehensive explanations of foreign policy puzzles and better identifying likely future trajectories. I have suggested that such an approach, albeit confronted with tensions, would not be unscientific. Realism and constructivism are both too limited – constructivism is largely metatheoretical and struggles to theorise the conditions for change and

continuity while classical realism cannot give account of social reality. Combining their insights allows for stronger analytical guidance. Integrating insights on subjectivity is crucial. Ignoring this, as neorealists and constructivists do, or treating this as intervening variables, as neoclassical realists do, can lead to an oversimplification and misrepresentation of foreign policy.

Would it be helpful to strengthen realist constructivism further? Laura Sjoberg (2020, p. 180) argues that the combination should not stop with realism and constructivism by suggesting "that the idea of 'the more the merrier' applies to international relations (IR) theorizing as much as it does to social gatherings, if not more so". I am hesitant, as this would likely add more tensions. For instance, while it could be tempting to incorporate insights from political psychology into the synthesis, the scientific foundations are quite different. It appears that classical realism adds sufficient insights for this purpose as the psychological-cognitive characteristics of political leaders have been tied to groupism in realism (Mercer, 1995). However, realism could also need an overhaul in this regard as its understanding of psychology comes across as Western-centric and unnuanced. I agree with Anthony Marsella (2013) that psychology needs to be understood as indigenous to the context within which it emerges and operates. While more research on the integration of cognitive-psychological insights in realist constructivism is needed, I believe that the synthesis is well suited to accommodate this, yielding more value for explanatory theory and practice theory.

Among the many research avenues on emotions in IR and foreign policy, which could also be integrated into realist constructivism, investigating how emotions (e.g. on friendship; Berenskoetter and van Hoef, 2017) affect political leaders' thought processes is highly relevant, too. Future research might want to debate whether emotions fall under the mental processes that cognitive psychology encompasses or are better conceptualised differently.

Ned Lebow's approach of "inefficient causation" provides useful guidance when seeking to operationalise realist constructivism for the explanation or forecasting of foreign policy. Its value was only sketched here, and more attention will need to be paid to the theoretical entry points. Lebow's approach captures the messy reality of foreign policy and social reality broadly. As much as one might like to see a 2x2 matrix, the elements that inform the ontological assumptions (contingent possibilities and transhistorical limitations) combine with structure and agency in erratic ways that cannot be captured neatly: structure and agency can each provide possibilities and limitations.[21] Overall, realist constructivism has clear potential, especially as a theory of foreign policy (emphasis on small-N studies) but also as a theory of world politics, which remains a key research avenue. When applying realist constructivism empirically, emphasis could be placed on adding knowledge to IR's practice turn on how the

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21   Thanks to Jennifer Sterling-Folker for teasing out this point.

social world is endogenous to practice and how human nature attributes shape practice.

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