

# Week 7 Evolution: From Neo-Liberalism to Constructivism

## Assigned Readings

Dunne text: K. M. Fierke, "Constructivism," (ch. 9)

Alexander Wendt (1992) "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46(2): 391-426

Richard Price (1998) "Dangerous Liaisons? Constructivism and Critical International Theory" (with Christian Reus-Smit, co-author), *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:3, pp. 259-294

# What is Constructivism?

Rejecting the rationalist precepts of neorealism and neoliberalism, constructivists advance a sociological perspective on world politics, emphasizing the importance of normative as well as material structures, the role of identity in the constitution of interests and action, and the mutual constitution of agents and structures. They have honed these assumptions into an increasingly sophisticated set of theoretical propositions about international relations, demonstrated through a rapidly expanding body of empirical research (Price & Reus-Smit, p. 1)

# Where does Constructivism come from?

- Complicated question
- Internally generated but also a product of external developments in social theory

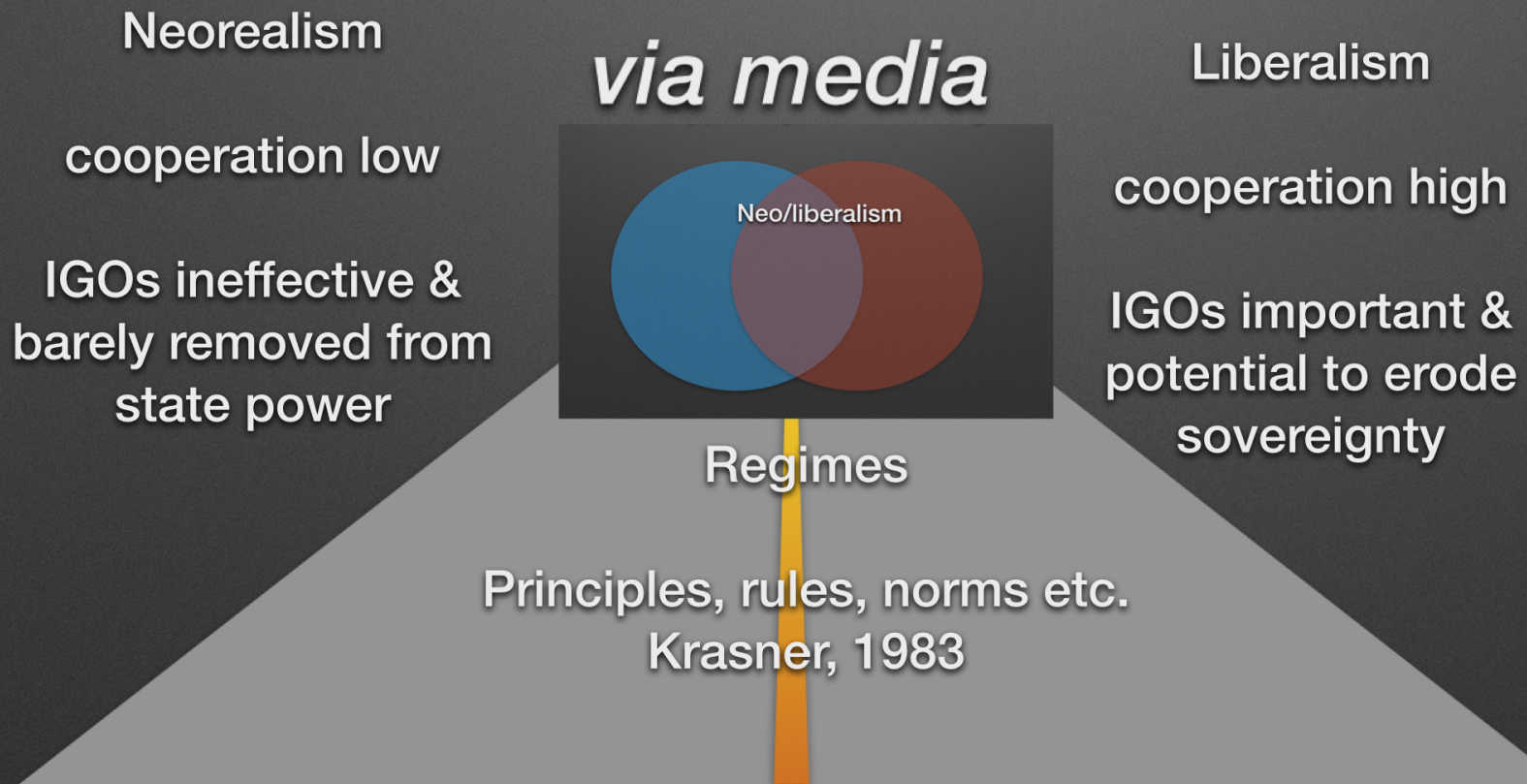
# The internal source: neoliberal institutionalism

- What is a “neo-liberal” approach to IR?

Neo-realism + liberalism = neo/liberalism



## 2. Regime theory



# Neoliberal institutionalism seeks to fill a perceived void

Realist/Neorealist images of stalemate & conflict (anarchy)



e.g. Regime theory



Liberal vision of more cooperative institutional world

# Regimes, epistemology & ontology

- Regimes closely associated with norms
- But are norms amenable to traditional techniques associated with positivism?

Friedrich Kratochwil

“we need to match epistemology with ontology”

- Sets the stage for constructivism

# One Last Paradigmatic Hope? Constructivism

Alexander Wendt



# Constructivism as a “Paradigm”

- Closely associated with (but not owned by) Wendt
- in 2013 TRIP survey of 1400 International Relations scholars Wendt named as the most influential scholar in the field over the past 20 years



“Academic disciplines seem to require totemic figures: writers who act as focal points, whose ideas you love, or hate, but can't ignore, and who will be inflicted on students for decades”

Martin Shaw

# focuses on “anarchy”

- Like Waltz, Wendt interested in “grand theory”
- revisits problem of anarchy in new way (transcends “neo-neo” debate)



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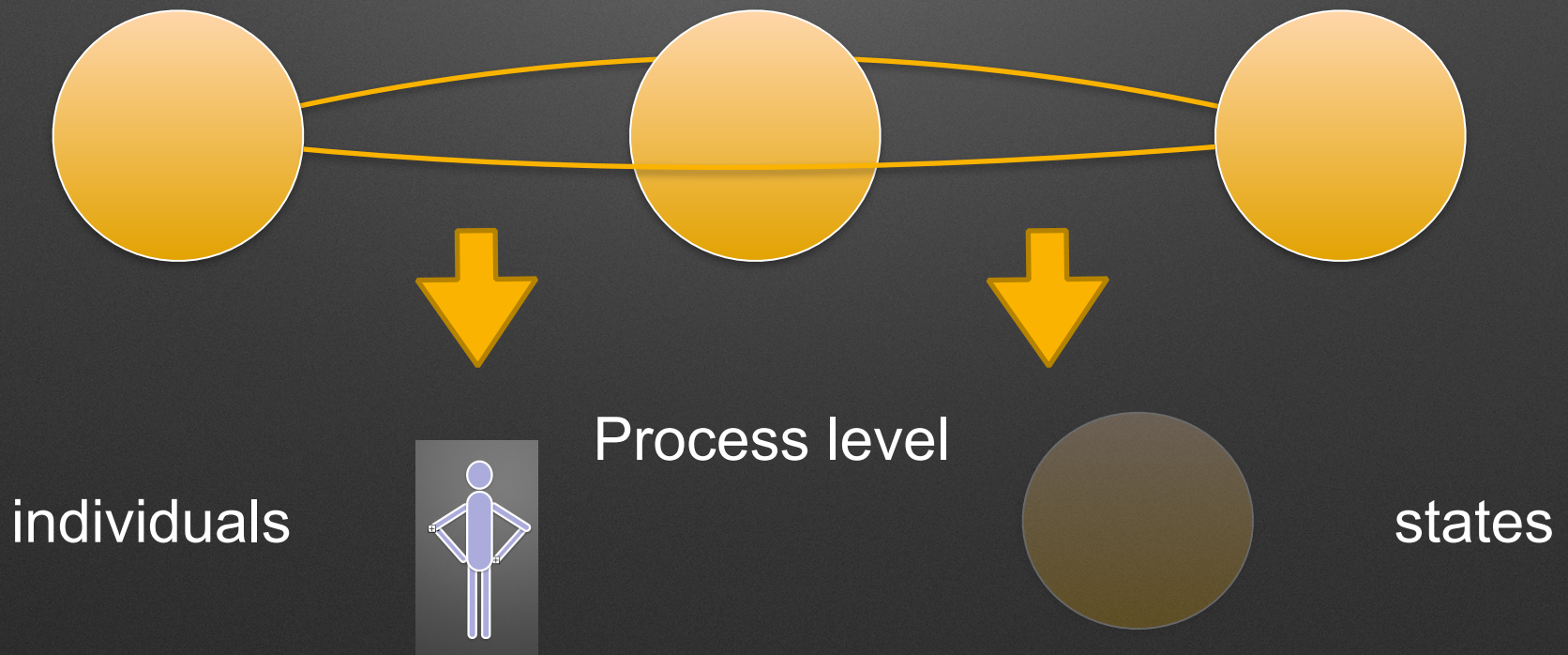
**Anarchy is itself an institutional phenomenon: it is “what states make of it”**

“self-help and power politics are institutions, not essential features of anarchy”

**“I argue that self-help and power politics do not follow either logically or causally from anarchy and that if today we find ourselves in a self-help world, this is due to process, not structure”**

**Wendt**

Neorealism a closed system

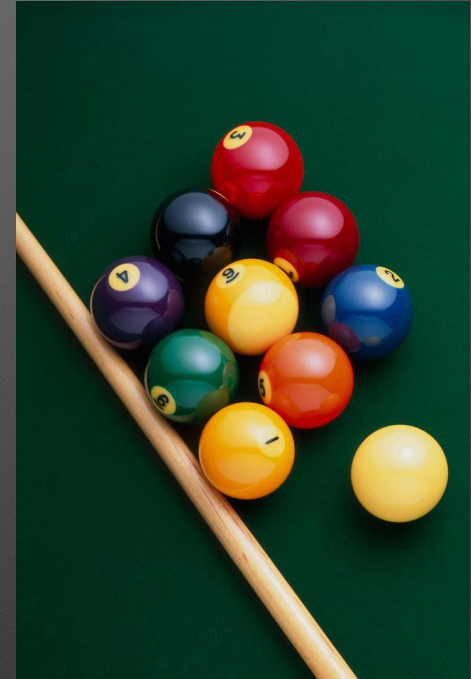




# Traditional rationalist theories of IR—a single objective reality

States (& individuals)  
independent, self-contained units-  
driven by logic of consequences (e.g. maximize individual interest)

billiard ball model



The sameness of these independent political units across time and space allows for the identifications of regularities, generalization, and (thus) “theory”



**But states contain individuals & groups which share contacts/ interests with external groups**



cobweb model

**And States themselves exist in a social context**



# Core constructivist view

the alleged objective realities of IR take particular historical, cultural, and political forms (reality is a social construction)

“Most objects of international relations, unlike trees, rocks, or glaciers, exist only by virtue of human acts of creation which happen in a cultural, historical, and political context of meaning” (p. 166, Fierke)



# So why didn't we know this before?

IR is “not an innocent profession”

In other words, the reality of the reality of IR as a social construction is obscured by the further reality that the theories it generate are also formed within and mediated by historically & culturally specific conditions!

And, until the end of the Cold War, the importance of social context lay hidden behind a seemingly permanent reality of conflict

Cooperation now *seems* to be breaking out everywhere



for Wendt, neorealists misunderstand structure:

the “things” of IR have no independent meaning but are  
situated in an ideational context



# Neorealist structure is over-determined

structure created by, & constrains, agents with minimal elements of socialization (closed system)

Structure

constrains character & behaviour of states toward competition

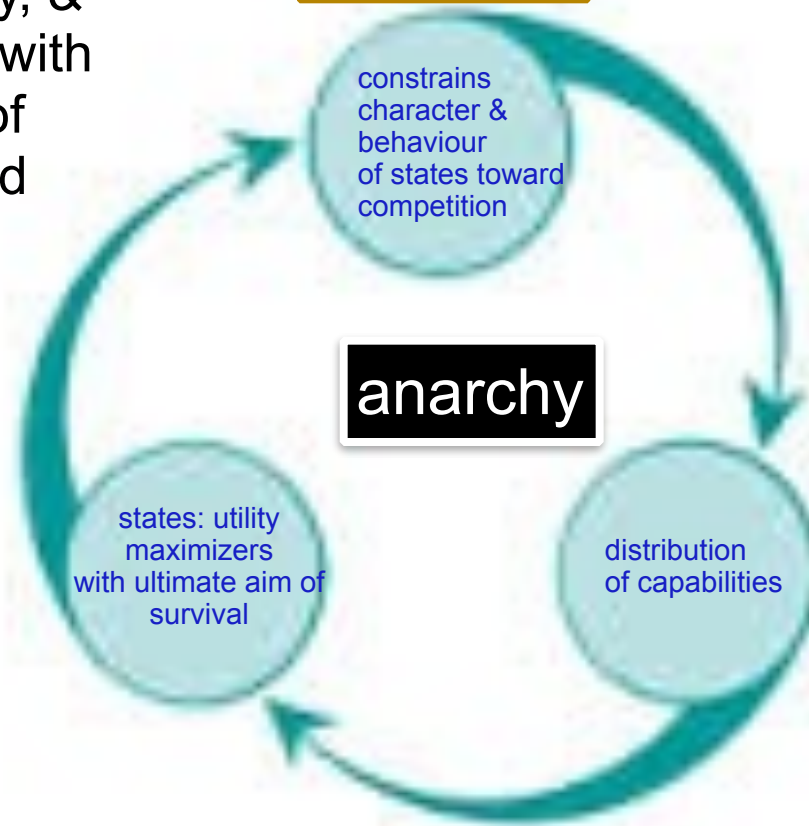
anarchy

Agents  
(ontology)

states: utility maximizers with ultimate aim of survival

distribution of capabilities

Change



# Situating Constructivism: First Location

between neoliberal institutionalism &  
postmodernism

Neo/Neo theory  
(positivist commitment  
to external reality)

Constructivism  
(post-positivist  
commitment to  
internal reality)

Post-Structuralism  
(post-positivist  
rejection of reality  
& science)



*via media*



- For Giddens structures & agents mutually constituted
- For Wendt, “Anarchy is what states make of it,” BUT are states what anarchy makes of them?
- Can structure (human-made or not) be altered?

- Difficult problem with no clear answers
- For Giddens, “structuration theory... is not meant to be a theory of anything”
- What does this mean?

## Location three: the *English School* or *International Society* approach

- Methods & language of constructivism “new” but is the theorizing?
- International system of Waltz a value-neutral pattern of regularities
- Can also be conceived as a society
- Wendt says actor identities & rules formed/shaped by interactions
- This idea already well established



# Constructivist critique of the Neo-Neo approach

- Static views become self-fulfilling prophecies
- Initial assumptions & assessment of threat lead to less (not more) security
- Greater insecurity reinforces initial assumptions
- BUT all ideas/norms susceptible to change
- The “facts” of IR are also ideas

# Concluding thoughts

- Offers intersubjective political “reality” in which actors (states) create practices/institutions
- These practices/institutions acquire a social standing independent of the states that create them
- The world is neither fixed or material
- But it remains REAL!

and there lies the rub...

# Constructivism



subjects ever evolving: identities fluid and shaped over time by cultural, social, political (and not just) material conditions

## Location two: broader debates in general social theory

- Adopts language & methods of certain sociologists & social theorists
- Berger & Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966)
- Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (1984)





# structurationist conception of structure



# Constructivism's “split personality”?

“It is impossible to write about international politics and, at the same time, to write about writing about international politics” Charles Reynolds, 1973.

- The world of IR is intersubjective & post-positivist BUT the world of the theorist is depicted by Wendt as objective & independent
- The observed is post-positivist; the observer is a positivist





Once again, an IR theory places itself outside the world?

# back to the future?

- This appears to make Constructivism a more elaborate form of behaviouralism
- The “meanings people give their behaviour are critical *data* for scientific observation....”
- Can ideas about ideas be objective & scientific?

# Constructivism as liberalism?

- Value-biased toward cooperation?
- Shares regime emphasis on “convergent expectations”
- Changes in behaviour = changes in intersubjective understandings
- Ignores or downplays realist skepticism about actor motives
- But how flexible are identities & interests?
- Are self & group identity arbitrary or rooted in something fundamental?