Identities and Interests in International Relations

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IDENTITIES AND INTERESTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS[1]

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The neoutilitarian framework

According to the realist theory of world politics, the sovereign state is the basic actor on the international stage. There are several reasons adduced in support of this assumption. First, sovereign states are not subordinate to any overarching authority; thus, the international environment is *anarchic*. Second, the action of non-state actors (nongovernmental organizations, churches, multinational corporations, international political parties, etc.) ultimately depends on the stability and political authority of the sovereign state. Realists also assume that conflicts of interests among states are inevitable, as states typically compete for the same scant resources. The fundamental interest of states is, from a realist perspective, the national survival in the inherently hostile environment of international anarchy. *Power* is the most important means to ensure survival, and there is no constraint upon the ways statesmen are to use power other than their judgment and the responsibility they have in furthering national survival.[2]

On the other hand, post-World War I idealists and their contemporary followers, neoliberals, are optimistic about the possibility of achieving cooperation under international anarchy. They emphasize the prospects for peace and prosperity that can emerge from the workings of international organizations and other major types of non-state actors. In particular, they underscore the importance of spreading democracy, education, liberal trade,

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[1] The present paper is an extended and modified version of a section of the study "The Social Constructivist Approach to International Relations", due to appear in the *New Europe College Yearbook 2005–2006.*
[2] Through the work of its grandmaster, Hans Morgenthau (1949/1993), realism has assimilated a Weberian definition of power, as one's ability to make the others act according to one's own will. More consonant with the views discussed in section 2 of the current paper is Stephen Lukes (1974) original view that power is not only about the actors' conflictually carrying out their will to pursue their interests, but also, and more fundamentally, about affecting the ways actors *perceive and define* their interests.

arms control and human rights, and denounce "the cynical calculus of pure power politics", as Bill Clinton put it, as a way of conducting world politics. Nonetheless, what realism (and its modern version, neorealism) and neoliberalism have in common is a rational decision-making framework of political deliberation, in which statesmen perform utility calculi meant to maximize the interests of their states on the world scene, on the assumption of given ordered sets of preferences. Thus, there is a remarkable convergence of the approaches to international relations theory, and a fruitful standardization of their methodological tools. As John Ruggie summarizes,

> Both take the existence of international anarchy for granted, though they may differ as to its precise causal force. Both stipulate that states are the primary actors in international politics. Both stipulate further that the identities and interests if states are given, a priory and exogenously – that is to say, external to and unexplained within the terms of their theories. On that basis, both assume that states are rational actors maximizing their own expected utilities, defined in such material terms as power, security, and welfare. (Ruggie 1998: 9)

Indeed, the disagreements between neorealism and neoliberalism basically reduce to underlining different aspects of structural anarchy, that is to say, competition and cooperation, respectively. This is not to deny the significant consequences of this difference, yet their methodological similarity justified Ruggie to coin the term *neoutilitarianism* to refer to both neorealism and neoliberalism. Also, this is not to ignore other important differences between the neorealist and neoliberal theories. Here are some more of them: while neoliberals insist of the importance of the *absolute* gains that international actors make through mutually advantageous arrangements, neorealists are interested in the *relative* gains, as systematic differences in gains can be converted in threatening military power (Grieco 1988). Then, while both neorealists and neoliberals agree that both security and prosperity are important components of national interests, they emphasize these aspects very differently. Finally, the distribution of capabilities is of uppermost importance for neorealists (Waltz 1979), whereas neoliberals tend to insist on the intentions, interests, and information of international actors.

Nonetheless, it is on the neoutilitarian commonalities that I shall focus below. Both neorealism and neoliberalism take the *self*, i.e. the identity of the state actor, as *exogenously given*, that is, to be formed prior to and independently of the computing framework of the statesman, fundamentally stable and, for that matter, definitional for the preferences and interests of the state actor. But, the question poses itself, what does the *self* stand for when talking about *self*-interested states pursuing *self*-help strategies? There is a strong representation of the empiricist camp in the political philosophy of the state, according to which the state is, ontologically speaking, a mere useful

fiction or metaphor. It just allows us, by presuming its autonomous agency, to readily explain and anticipate international politics. For example, Stephen Krasner (1999: 7) considers that

> the ontological givens are rulers, specific policy makers, usually but not always the executive head of state. Rulers, not states – and not the international system – make choices about policies, rules, and institutions. (Krasner 1999: 7)

There is no state in the sense of an independently existing agent, empiricists argue. There is a long and respectable philosophical tradition behind this stance, going back to Hobbes and Locke, of regarding the states as a form of collective authority, an aggregation of individual wills that follow from individual delegations of authority in order to better pursue the interests of the many. But there are also thinkers of holist convictions, holding that social entities such as the state are ontologically substantive, and hence are irreducible to lower level entities – individuals or groups. Social constructivists typically belong to this camp.

The constructivist insight

Alexander Wendt is one of the main representatives of the social constructivist approach to international relations. Broadly defined, social constructivism is a philosophical framework assuming, from an ontological viewpoint, that there are entities (kinds, relations, and properties) which depend for their existence on human collective intentionality, and that these entities are produced by various social mechanisms relying on collective action. The constructivist contention with regard to international relations is that most entities characteristic of political theory and practice – such as "society," "state," "sovereignty." etc. – are socially constructed; in other words, they are created and re-created through collective action, provided that the "boundary conditions" (social, political and economic circumstances) allow it. Sovereignty, for instance, is often claimed to be socially constructed. Thus, Thomas Bierstecker and Cynthia Weber state that

> Sovereignty provides the basis in international law for claims of state actions, and its violation is routinely invoked as a justification for the use of force in international relations. Sovereignty, therefore, is an inherently *social* concept. States' claims to sovereignty construct a social environment in which they can interact as an international society of states, while at the same time the mutual recognition of claims to sovereignty is an important element in the construction of states themselves. (1996: 1-2)

We shall get back to sovereignty below, in an attempt to disambiguate the concept. For the remainder of this paper, the focus will be on the constructivist

contribution to understanding the identities and interests of state actors in international politics. Wendt sees the state as a genuinely existing entity with substantive ontological status. He deals at length with the inability of the instrumentalist thinking about state agency to reduce it to individual action without explanatory loss. It is not my main interest here to address the pros and cons of the notion that the state is a unitary actor. Yet I find very apt and useful the dimensions along which Wendt explains the concept of *state* and, implicitly, its identity and interests. There are five characteristics that Wendt singles out as definitional for the notion of state:

(1) an institutional legal order,
(2) an organization claiming a monopoly on the legitimate use of organized violence,
(3) an organization with sovereignty,
(4) a society, and
(5) a territory. (Wendt 1999: 202)

The notions of internal "institutional legal order", "monopoly on the legitimate use of violence", "society", and "territory" are sufficiently transparent for our purposes, although there are salient philosophical aspects to discuss about each of them. "Sovereignty" is much more in need of clarification. Wendt distinguishes between and *internal* and an *external* kind of sovereignty, where the former refers to "the state as the supreme locus of political authority in society", and the latter to "the absence of any external authority higher than the state, like other states, international law, or a supranational Church" (1999: 207-208). He sees external sovereignty as "relatively straightforward", but recent research on the topic displays the potential source of confusion that the concept of sovereignty is in international relations theory.

The best analysis of sovereignty belongs to Krasner (1999). He distinguishes four distinct meanings that have been ascribed to the term "sovereignty".

International legal sovereignty refers to the practices associated with mutual recognition, usually between territorial entities that have formal juridical independence. *Westphalian sovereignty* refers to political organization based on the exclusion of the external actors from authority structures within a given territory. *Domestic sovereignty* refers to the formal organization of political authority within the state and the ability of public authorities to exercise effective control within the borders of their own policy. *Interdependence sovereignty* refers to the ability of public authorities to regulate the flow of information, ideas, goods, people, pollutants, or capital across the borders of their state. (Krasner 1999: 3-4)

Krasner admirably documents that these four sorts of sovereignty do not covary, meaning that "a state can have one but not the other" (1999: 4). For example, a state can have Westphalian sovereignty without having international

legal sovereignty – e.g. Taiwan. On the other hand, most states with international legal sovereignty do not enjoy the Westphalian kind, either because they concede to this by agreement, as in the case of the European Union members, or because they are under de facto domination of some foreign power. Also, numerous states have neither domestic, nor interdependence sovereignty; the so-called failed states of Africa are the most blatant instances.

Krasner turns to March and Olsen's (1998) distinction between the *logic of expected consequences* and the *logic of appropriateness* to construct his theory of sovereignty:

> Logics of consequences see political action and outcomes, including institutions, as the product of rational calculating behavior designed to maximize a given set of unexplained preferences. Classical game theory and neoclassical economics are well-known examples. Logics of appropriateness understand political action as a product of rules, roles, and identities that stipulate appropriate behavior in given situations. (Krasner 1999: 5)

Using this terminology, he frames the thesis that logics of consequences dominate the scene of international politics and that the institution of sovereignty is being hypocritically used in an instrumental sense, under the appearance of institutionally regulated behavior. He puts it bluntly in the slogan "Sovereignty is organized hypocrisy". The domestic life of states is dominated by logics of appropriateness, for the domestic social and political system is strongly institutionalized and the roles of political actors are strongly regulated. However, the international environment, characterized by conflicts of interests, power asymmetries and the lack of an overriding authority offers the actors in particular situations the possibility to choose from different rules and follow those that best promote their interests. For example, the conflicting rules of nonintervention in another state's essential jurisdiction and humanitarian intervention are given course according to the instrumental interests of the decision-makers.

Now, where do *identity* and *self* fit into the above analysis of the concept of *state*? It is easier to answer this by taking into account the following four aspects of identity distinguished by Wendt: *personal/corporate* (depending on whether it concerns particulars or corporate agents, respectively), *type*, *role*, and *collective* aspects. Let us take them one by one:

(a) The personal/corporate identity refers to the distinctive material constitution of the entity. For states, corporate identity can be spelled out along the definitional characteristics delineated above, where sovereignty is to be taken in its internal sense.

(b) Type identity "refers to a social category or 'label' applied to persons [or entities] who share… some characteristics, in appearance, behavioral traits, attitudes, values, skills, knowledge, opinions, experience, historical commonalities, and so on" (Wendt 1999: 225). An actor – individual or corporate – can have

multiple type identities simultaneously, as it can share various sets of values and opinions, and display different forms of behavior in relationship with different other actors. Through shared beliefs and values, type identity introduces a cultural element in the overall analysis of identity.

(c) Role identities are cultural *par excellence*, as they designate the culturally conditioned roles that an actor plays in relation to the others. Roles are assigned relational predicates, such as "son", "teacher", "ruler" with respect to individuals, or "ally", "enemy", "hegemon" with regard to states. Each of them presupposes at least another object in order to apply validly. The "learning" of roles is a matter of the actors' collective knowledge of each other's beliefs and expectations. By acquiring such collective knowledge, each of the actors bound by relational predicates internalizes adequate behavior rules, which position them with respect to one another. Thus, the *self* reflects itself in the *other* and this reflection is assimilated in the actor's identity.

(d) Finally, collective identity is reached though a cognitive process "in which the Self-Other distinction becomes blurred and at the limit transcended altogether" (Wendt 1999: 229). Collective identity is the most salient aspect of Wendt's account of international relations. Unlike neorealism and neoliberalism, social constructivism observes the circumstances under which the boundaries of the self extend over, or are engulfed by, the other. Obviously, given the essential distinctiveness expressed in the personal/corporate aspect, identity cannot be collective in every respect, but only regarding some issue-specific properties.

Interests follow from the nature of identity, because what an actor *wants* depends on who an actor *is*. Ultimately, interests are motivational factors whose fulfillment contributes to the reproduction of their underlying identity. But we must distinguish between the actor's *subjective* perception and opinions of what its needs are, and the *objective* actions that must be taken in order to meet the actor's needs. Both kinds of interest have to be properly explained. Subjective interests are important because they are the proximate motivators of political actors. Statesmen, for instance, typically define and assess the national interest according to their information, values, and ideology. It is, therefore, salient to have a proper description of their subjective views on what the national interest is and how it is to be pursued. If political decision-makers constantly pursue a subjective national interest that diverges from the objective one, the identity underlying their political views will perish. But then how can one ever ascertain what the national interest really is? Is it something that only elites (political and/or epistemic) can grasp? Or it is simply what the majority of a society decides it is best for the most? Incidentally, the former can be true, yet the elites of undemocratic states can lack the legitimate means to pursue their objective interest. On the other hand, though democratically sanctioned ways of action are legitimate, majorities can be wrong or short-sighted (suboptimal).

It is relevant to delineate some salient aspects of the national interest. George and Keohane (1980) identify, from a neoliberal stance, three dimensions of the national interest: *physical survival*, *autonomy*, and *economic well-being*, to which Wendt adds a fourth one, "*collective self-esteem*" (1999: 235). Fundamentally, as realism teaches, the national interest concerns the *survival* of the society and its individual members. But our intuitions command other dimensions too, since it is not indifferent *how* the members of a state live. *Autonomy* refers to the ability of a state to retain exclusive control over the allocation of its resources and the choice of its government. It is a characteristic of the internal sovereignty of a state. Further on, *economic well-being* designates the material resource base of a state. The economic status is crucial not only for the possibility of survival, but also for its sovereignty and *self-esteem*. Wendt aptly notices that "self-esteem is a basic human need of individuals, and one of the things that individuals seek in group membership" (1999: 236). Self-esteem is a psychological factor unmistakably influenced by culture, hence also by the relationship between the *self* and the *other*. These four dimensions of national interest may not be concomitantly achievable – in fact, they can even diverge. However, "In the long run all four must be satisfied. States that do not will tend to die out" (1999: 239).

Summing up, the issue is not really whether states can act altruistically, that is, motivated by something else than self-interest. After all, with a contractarian mindset, any action, even the most generous one, can be explained as a matter of self-interest (Gauthier 1977). The genuine theoretical contribution of social constructivism is that the *self* can expand so as to merge, in certain significant respects, with the *other*, to the effect that altruism can be understood as the effect of a transformed self-interest. Once a particular group of states form a collective identity, self-interested action is actually perceived as cooperative.

The European Union is the favorite source of evidence for social constructivism. The issue of constructing an European identity can be analyzed as a process of social groups progressively "learning" to identify with others in "concentric circles", as Wendt put it. Nonetheless, I choose the following concluding example to show not only the theoretical resources of constructivism, but also some obvious limits of neoutilitarianism. In a controversial article published in the *London Review of Books* in March 2006, John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt maintain that the amount of economic and military help that the US provides Israel in virtue of their privileged partnership defies the logic of self-interest that Washington should follow according to the neorealist prescriptions. The authors list a series of measures of material support that the US has given Israel after World War II, which they deem disproportionate relative to both the benefits it brings Washington, and to the objective needs of Israel as an industrialized country. They identify the reason for this level of support in the domestic American politics, and particularly in the efficient "Israel Lobby",

which, as they surmise, has managed to divert America's Middle East foreign policy from the American national interest. I shall not here review the pros and cons that have been expressed in the debate triggered by this paper.[3] The point of bringing forward this particular case is to show that the neorealist conceptual framework, from within which Mearsheimer and Walt argue, makes difficult for them to see the possibility of an increasing perception of collective identity between Israel and the US, grounded in historical, cultural, moral, and civilization elements of identity. Consequently, there is a dominant perception of similarity of interests in both Americans and Israelis regarding many coordinates of their foreign policy, as well as an empathic understanding of each others' security fears. Up to a certain point, it is open to discussion whether Washington had more to gain in terms of security and economics from a more pro-Arab attitude in the Middle East. Yet no sophisticated foreign policy analysis can ignore actors' identities in accounting for the ways they act in order to achieve their interests.

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[3] A very good sample of them is given in the July/August 2006 issue of *Foreign Policy*.