

**Analyzing Change in International Politics:  
The New Institutionalism and the  
Interpretative Approach**

**- Guest Lecture -**

**Peter J. Katzenstein\***

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Max-Planck-Institut für Gesellschaftsforschung  
Lothringer Str. 78  
D-5000 Köln 1  
Federal Republic of Germany  
Telephone 0221/ 336050  
Fax 0221/ 3360555

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\* Prof. Peter J. Katzenstein, Cornell University, Department of Government, McGraw Hall, Ithaca, N.Y. 14853, USA

## Abstract

This paper argues that realism misinterprets change in the international system. Realism conceives of states as actors and international regimes as variables that affect national strategies. Alternatively, we can think of states as structures and regimes as part of the overall context in which interests are defined. States conceived as structures offer rich insights into the causes and consequences of international politics. And regimes conceived as a context in which interests are defined offer a broad perspective of the interaction between norms and interests in international politics. The paper concludes by suggesting that it may be time to forego an exclusive reliance on the Euro-centric, Western state system for the derivation of analytical categories. Instead we may benefit also from studying the historical experience of Asian empires while developing analytical categories which may be useful for the analysis of current international developments.

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In diesem Aufsatz wird argumentiert, daß der "realistische" Ansatz außenpolitischer Theorie Wandel im internationalen System fehlinterpretiere. Dieser versteht Staaten als Akteure und internationale Regime als Variablen, die nationale Strategien beeinflussen. Alternativ kann man Staaten als Strukturen und Regime als Teile eines übergreifenden Kontextes begreifen, innerhalb dessen Interessen definiert werden. Wenn Staaten als Strukturen aufgefaßt werden, ergeben sich vielfältige Einsichten in die Ursachen und Wirkungen internationaler Politik. Und Regime, konzipiert als Kontexte, in denen sich Interessen konstituieren, eröffnen einen breiten Einblick in die Interaktion zwischen Normen und Interessen im Bereich internationaler politischer Prozesse. Das Papier schließt mit der Empfehlung, analytische Kategorien nicht mehr ausschließlich aus der Betrachtung des euro-zentrischen, westlichen Staatensystems zu entwickeln. Vielmehr erscheint es fruchtbar, auch die historische Entwicklung asiatischer Reiche zu untersuchen, um Kategorien für die Analyse gegenwärtiger internationaler Entwicklungen zu gewinnen.

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## Introduction

The 1980s have witnessed remarkable changes that are affecting virtually all corners of the globe. The international position of the United States and of Japan have been altered greatly by the decline in American competitiveness and by the shift in financial power. The Soviet Union and China are going through fundamental transformations in their domestic structures and in their links to the international system. Western Europe appears to be committed to create truly integrated markets. Eastern Europe has experienced changes of crisis proportions. Latin America struggles at the brink of bankruptcy. And many parts of Africa are in a stage of social disintegration. Yet the core paradigm of international relations theory, structural realism, seeks to understand a rapidly changing world with categories of analysis that emphasize continuity and stability. Now, as always in history, states are pursuing their interests by responding only to the competitive pressures of the international system. Two variants of realism, "neo-realism" and "neo-liberal institutionalism", refine and sharpen the realist research program without relinquishing its static categories (Keohane 1986). But the importance of change in international politics suggests a broadening of our analytical perspectives. State actors and state interests are not only premises of analysis; they can also be taken as problems for analysis.

In affecting this shift in perspective I shall rely on two intellectual developments that recently have shaped much of the theoretical discussion in the fields of comparative and international politics. The "new institutionalism" (March/ Olsen 1984) is an ambiguous term that covers a very broad range of theoretical positions. I would like to restrict it here to theoretical orientations that emphasize the importance of states. This theoretical position differs from the central perspective of a liberal or marxist political sociology. The concept of "international regimes" (Krasner 1983) subsumes a variety of approaches that analyze international arrangements facilitating the coordination of policy. It develops further the theoretical inquiry of neo-functionalism in the 1960s and of transnationalism in the 1970s.

The argument is presented in four parts. Part I summarizes briefly two conceptions of international structure that encapsulate the differences set forth in the rest of the paper. Part II presents briefly the neo-realist view of states as unitary actors and contrasts it with the view of the state as a domestic and transnational structure of institutional, political and normative relations. Part III describes briefly the neo-liberal view of international regimes as variables that influence state strategies and contrasts it with an alternative that views regimes as part of a context in which political actors define their interests through the interpretation of norms. I argue in Parts II and III that the dominant strands in American international relations theory, neo-realism and neo-liberalism, take as given what must be included as a problem in any analysis of change in international politics: state actors and state interests. Part IV draws out some implications of this discussion. Finally, I conclude with the suggestion that current changes in the international system may be more easily grasped with analytical categories that derive from Asian rather than European history.

## I. International Structures

In the American study of international relations Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* has probably in recent years become the best-known book articulating the position of structural realism (Waltz 1979; Mandelbaum 1988). Waltz's realism is explicitly structural. It argues that the international state system molds states and defines the possibilities for cooperation and conflict. According to Waltz the international state system has three distinctive characteristics. It is decentralized; the most important actors, states, are unitary and functionally differentiated; and state systems, for example, multipolar or bipolar systems, are distinguished by differences in the distribution of the capabilities of the most important states. Waltz is very careful to specify only a restricted domain in security affairs as relevant for his theory. But within that domain developments in international politics are driven by the balancing of differences in capabilities in the international system.

Because he seeks to avoid at all cost introducing any consideration of the quality of states in his discussion of system structure, Waltz freely admits that in his theory all sources of change reside in units not in systems. "Changes in, and transformation of, systems originate not in the structure of a system but in its parts. Through selection, structures promote the continuity of systems in form; through variation, unit-level forces contain the possibilities of systemic change ... Systems change, or are transformed, depending on the resources and aims of their units and on the fates that befall them" (Waltz 1986: 343).

Structural realism emphasizes continuities in international politics. As John Ruggie has argued forcefully, it offers little insight into processes of change (Ruggie 1983, 1988). One important reason for the limits of structural realism lies in the fact that social recognition or empowerment adds to or diminishes the material capabilities of actors. Ruggie has pointed repeatedly to eras of great transformations, such as the shift from the medieval to the modern world, as involving more than considerations of which actors had how much power. The magnitude of power, in all its dimensions, is relevant primarily in eras of relative stability. What matters in eras of great change is which units have the right to act as a power. Since systems are more than the sum of their parts, one cannot think of actors apart from systems.

Ruggie's formulation refuses to take state actors as exogenously given. Because it conceives of systems and units as inescapably linked, it insists that change is not located in separate units that are exogenous to structure. Instead change is embedded in a totality which encompasses system and units. "Constitutive structures form such a deep level of social reality that, at any particular moment, they may seem a rule rather than a regularity of social life" (Ruggie 1988: 15). In contrast to structural realism empirically oriented work informed by this conception of international structure does not focus on the measuring or mapping of power. It looks instead to evidence which points to a variety of authority relations, within and between states, in global contexts that mix elements of territorial autonomy with functional interdependence.

Raymond Duvall and Alexander Wendt have usefully contrasted these two conceptions of international structure (Duvall/ Wendt 1988). Realism conceives of an international system of states to be studied with the categories of economics, not of an international society of states to be analyzed with the categories of sociology. Focusing on anarchic competition it builds on the contractarian tradition in either its Hobbesian or Lockean version. This provides a sharp contrast to the communitarian approach informed by Grotius that recognizes the existence of a normative order among states. For realists state action is based on self-interested utility maximization, and the behavior of states is coordinated by the unintended consequences of functional interdependence. For the critics of realism state action is based on the implicit or explicit consensus about, among others, the norms that help coordinate action. Realists view economic or security regimes as products of state choice; once created, these organizational artifacts of hegemonic rule or collective state action constrain state behavior. The critics of realism focus on international law and diplomacy as agreed upon preconditions of state choice; they are constitutive of states and enable state behavior. Duvall and Wendt argue that the theoretical conception of the critics of realism is deeper and more dynamic than that of structural realism. But the two conceptions of international structure, they also insist, are complementary.

In an era of great changes in international politics two variants of realism have been developed that seek to improve on the static character of structural realism. Game-theoretic formulations of neo-realism model state strategies. They assume that exogenously determined state objectives are fundamentally constrained by the structure of games played between states. Liberal institutionalism argues that under some conditions international regimes serve state interests and thus make possible cooperation in an anarchic environment. Both variants of realism confront theoretical perspectives that claim either to be supported by substantial empirical research or to have categories more adequate to the analysis of change. The critics of realism promise to broaden and enrich realist theories of international politics.



## II. States as Actors or States as Structures

In the last decade political realism has been influenced strongly by game theory and the analytical premises of micro-economics. Neo-realism assumes that states are unified and act rationally in international politics. Since neo-realism values parsimony this premise is relinquished only with great reluctance. The intellectual affinity of neo-realism with the position of economists and game theorists modelling the determinants of political action is not accidental. They too insist on a rigorously deductive form of modelling strategic choice and interaction. This theoretical stance is connected to a second premise of neo-realist theorizing. The analysis of international politics disregards the domestic determinants of policy. State interests are exogenous to the theory. And states are assumed to react only to the opportunities and constraints of the international state system. In short, central to neo-realist analysis is the concept of unitary state actors which follow the dictates of rationality to pursue their interests in the competitive environment of the international state system (Axelrod 1984; Oye 1986).

This view is problematic. It flies in the face of a very lively theoretical discussion and rich empirical studies that have left their mark on the field of comparative politics during the last two decades (Krasner 1984; Evans/ Rueschemeyer/ Skocpol 1985; Almond 1988). In his review article of some of the literature Stephen Krasner goes to some length to differentiate the statist perspective from pluralist theories of political leadership. "The dominant conceptualization in the non-Marxist literature is the state as a bureaucratic apparatus and institutionalized legal order in its totality" (Krasner 1984: 224). The two other conceptualizations that he discusses, the state as government and the state as a normative order, emphasize politics and norms. These conceptualizations are both related to and distinct from the structural view of the state. Theda Skocpol's review of statist research focuses on the autonomy and the capacity of states. The central point of her essay is the variability of states conceived of as either "organizationally coherent collectivities of state officials ... relatively insulated from ties to currently dominant socioeconomic interests" or as "patterned relationships between state and society" (Skocpol 1985: 9,

19). As Skocpol points out the autonomy of state objectives and capacities of states are not fixed. They vary over time, across issue areas and among states. States and their interests cannot be stipulated deductively. They must be investigated empirically in concrete historical settings that make it easy to resist the temptation of premature generalization.

On this point the contrast with neo-realism could not be greater. Much of the writing on state structures is in fact informed by a historical perspective. State structures are not only the products of competition in the international system but also of history. And the legacy of history leaves a deep imprint on their character. One prominent example is the effect Alexander Gerschenkron's work on the timing of industrialization has had on conceptions of state structures. Gerschenkron's historical studies identified two poles, liberalism and statism, that have anchored historically grounded approaches to the study of the state. Samuel Huntington's comparison between the United States and Britain, Mancur Olson's implicit comparison of the United States and Britain with West Germany and Japan and Barrington Moore's sweeping analysis of America, Europe and Asia all have a geographic and a chronological dimension. They distinguish between early industrializers in the West with a democratic past and no traumatic defeats in war on the one hand and late industrializers in the East with an authoritarian past and great national traumas on the other (Katzenstein 1989). Albert Hirschman's "late-late" industrializers or Chalmers Johnson's "developmental states" build on this analytical perspective by extending it to different state structures in different historical settings (Hirschman 1971; Johnson 1982).

But in the broader view of things the extension of the Gerschenkronian perspective remains only one strain in a much richer and complex historical tapestry that Charles Tilly has lucidly analyzed (Tilly 1988). Tilly wants to uncover the factors that account for the variation in time and space of various kinds of European state structures during the last millennium. And he is interested in understanding why states eventually converged on different variants of the national state. He argues that we must focus on variable constellations of coercion and capital. Distinguishing between internal deter-

minist and international determinist views of the origins of state structures and economically determinist and politically determinist views of the relations between state structures and the economy, Tilly arrives at four types of answers which stress the primacy of the mode of production, the world system, the nationalist tradition or the geopolitical circumstances. Tilly argues that "none of the four lines of explanations, much less their combination, yields a satisfactory set of answers to our pressing questions about European state formation. Most available explanations fail because they ignore the fact that many different kinds of states were viable at different stages of European history, because they locate explanations of state-to-state variation in individual characteristics of states rather than in relations among them, and because they assume implicitly a deliberate effort to construct the sorts of substantial, centralized states that came to dominate European life during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (Tilly 1988).

Tilly's explanation is inspired by the work of Moore, Rokkan and Mumford. It privileges war as an important determinant of state structures but relates this variable to continuously varying combinations of concentrations of capital and coercion. That is, it pushes us to relinquish the notion of a unitary and rational state central to neo-realism and to see it as, at best, one contingent historical outcome among many.

The theoretically most promising and empirically best supported position in comparative politics does not postulate unitary, rational state actors; it conceives of the state instead as a structure of institutional, normative and political components that become the focus of analysis (Wendt 1987; Laitin/ Lustick 1988). The state is a structure of domination. Its institutional features and legal norms define political authority in society. Governments rather than states are actors. There exists a close relationship between state structures and government actors. States are of great importance for the interests and purposes of governments. Alternatively, through the policies they enact governments reproduce and alter state structures.

During the last two decades one branch of policy studies has in fact treated the state as a structure that creates the premises and spaces for governmental action. Best known perhaps in the area of American politics is Theodore Lowi's distinction between four different policy arenas. Distributive, regulative, redistributive and constitutive policy create specific kinds of politics (Lowi 1964, 1972). Lowi's arenas of power work remarkably well in uncovering interesting similarities and differences across a wide range of policy issues. And they illuminate secular changes in American policy in the 19th and 20th century. But since they are derived from the American political experience - a strong legislature and a weak party system - these categories have not proven particularly useful in cross-national research. But Lowi's more general point has had a substantial impact on comparative policy studies. Policy studies do not only provide instrumental knowledge about government programs and choices. Policies are also a way of analyzing empirically distinctive state structures (Ashford/ Katzenstein/ Pempel 1988; Castles 1989). These studies do not return to the 19th century tradition of analyzing the formal structures of governments and constitutions. And they avoid the behaviorist temptation of compartmentalizing politics, public law and public administration from social and economic developments. Instead this style of comparative analysis uses policy material as evidence that permits us to analyze empirically variable state structures.

A structural analysis of the state is also provided by international relations scholars who include the social basis of the state explicitly in their analysis. John Ruggie's notion of "embedded liberalism", for example, refers to the social compromise between advocates of liberal internationalism and domestic welfare after World War II (Ruggie 1983). In a similar vein Robert Cox locates states in historical structures or frameworks for actions constituted by complex relations between material capabilities, ideas and institutions. Like ideal types these historical structures provide a simplified representation of a complex reality. Cox applies this method to three levels of analysis: the analysis of production and the social forces engendered by the production process; forms of the state that derive from particular state-society interactions; and world orders, configurations of forces

that pose the problem of war and peace for states (Cox 1981: 135-138; 1987). For Cox, as for many neo-Marxists, the state must be conceived explicitly in relation to the economic and social structures of which it is a part.

A theoretical perspective that focuses on state structures rather than state actors is related easily to views that emphasize the important relationships that link state and society in distinctive domestic structures (Katzenstein 1978, 1984, 1985; Comisso/ Tyson 1986). As Krasner has noted, this line of reasoning differs from bureaucratic politics approaches which have divided the state up into small pieces that can be analyzed as discrete parts floating in a permissive environment. In contrast "statist arguments have emphasized the overall structure of the bureaucratic apparatus, in particular the degree of centralization of power at the national level and the extent of state power vis-a-vis society" (Krasner 1984: 224). In the area of political economy differences in domestic structure lead to political choices that show recognizable patterns across issue areas and countries. Small states, for example, adhere to more liberal policies affecting the international economy than larger capitalist states; they also have a larger public sector. The concentration of social and economic power in the hands of government tends to be greater in late industrializers than in early industrializers; and this creates distinctive structural links between state and society.

In international relations theory the analysis of transnational relations and world systems analysis are two additional examples of analytical perspectives that seek to establish relations between states and international structures (Keohane/ Nye 1972; Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989). In this they converge with structural realism. But both perspectives differ in the international structure deemed central. Realism derives the security policy of state actors from their position in the international state system. Transnational relations research, by contrast, has investigated the causes and consequences of public-private interactions across national borders for world politics. And world systems analysis researches the effects of the international division of labor on the causes and consequences of international inequality and domination. I do not wish to minimize the difficulties resulting from the fact that

these structures are conceived of differently in different theoretical traditions. The critics of neo-realism may hum the same tune; but they sing in many different languages.

Despite this fact their arguments carry weight. This is evident even in some recent realist writings. Stephen Krasner, for example, is one of the leading neo-realists (Krasner 1978, 1985). For Krasner state actors are the central analytical category of international politics. But his more recent research into the sources of international trade conflicts between the United States and Japan lead to a surprising conclusion which is supported by the findings of Japan specialists. In the 1970s and 1980s it is empirically more accurate and analytically more rewarding to view the Japanese state as a structure rather than an actor (Krasner 1987; Friedman 1987; Van Wolferen 1989).

This conception of state structure differs considerably from the theoretical perspective of neo-realism. State and government are not equated. The state is not artificially separated from the social structures to which it is related in complex and variegated patterns. State interests and capacities are not simply specified theoretically. And the state is not viewed ahistorically thus risking to universalize a voluntarist conception of politics in an atomistic society. In contrast to neo-realism the conception of state structure differentiates analytically between structure and actor. It views the states as part of social structures. State interests and capacities become the object of empirical work. And since the state is understood in its historical context, voluntarist conceptions of politics in an atomistic society are analyzed as no more than one particular historical case among many. In short, a central category of neo-realism, the state, is not simply stipulated to analyze political reality. It becomes instead the focus of sustained theoretical analysis and empirical investigation.

### III. Regimes as Variables or Regimes as Context

Changes in the relative position of the United States in the international system have prompted some realists to think systematically about the role of international regimes. Regimes are defined as particular constellations of international principles, norms, rules and procedures that must not necessarily be institutionalized (Krasner 1983; Keohane 1984, 1989; Zürn 1987). This variant of realism has been called "neo-liberal institutionalism." International regimes emerge when a hegemonic state, for example the United States after 1945, attempts to mold the international order to suit the hegemon's interest and purpose. But international regimes acquire their own dynamic. With the passing of time they will express only incompletely the interests and purposes of the hegemonic state. This internal dynamic of international regimes makes it possible for the static categories of structural realist analysis to engage the changes that are occurring in different issue areas and geographical arenas in world politics. From this vantage point international regimes offer states different structural constraints and opportunities to pursue their interests. Regimes are variables which influence the political strategies of states. The advantages of international regimes are measurable in the reduction of transaction costs and the increase of information sources. Conflicts between state interests and international regimes typically are interpreted by neo-liberal institutionalism as the divergence between short-term and long-term interests.

This realist view of international regimes has elicited searching criticisms. Some of the critics question the usefulness of the regime category, and how it has been deployed in empirical research (Haggard/ Simmons 1987; Kreile 1988). The regime concept has been given very different meanings. As Martin Rochester notes critically "the term has been stretched to embrace everything from a patterned set of interactions (an international system), to any form of multilateral coordination, cooperation, or collaboration (provision of collective goods), to formal rules (international law), to formal machinery (international organization) ... Despite attempts to clarify the concept, confusion reigns" (Rochester 1986: 800).

One important source of this confusion lies in the fact that scholars use the regime concept both as a heuristic construct for theory construction and as a pragmatic solution to the inescapable problem of locating a political problem (for example, the financing of balance of payments deficits) in a hierarchy of problems (international monetary relations) (Kreile 1988: 9). A second difficulty arises from the fact that, in practice, it is exceedingly difficult to distinguish between principles and norms; no consistent practice has yet emerged from the empirical work that has been done. It is thus often impossible to establish clearly the existence or the scope of a regime. For regimes are often nested in complex ways. And their different parts are often related in a way that defies the linear and additive logic of neo-realist categories (Aggarwal 1985). Finally the empirical basis for the major findings of neo-realist regime theory is small. A decade of empirical work has taught us that regimes are more easily established by hegemons than by groups of states; that they do not change as quickly as the interests and capabilities that created them; that they are easier to maintain than to create; and that they appear to arise with greater frequency in economic than in security affairs. We know all of this and more based on two observations, the American and the British empires.

Other criticisms reach further by proposing a conceptualization of international regimes that differs greatly from a realist perspective. These criticisms are not yet well grounded empirically. But they charge realists with using the concept of international regimes in too narrow a manner, thus seriously distorting reality (Bull 1977; Ashley 1984, 1988a, 1988b; Alker 1986; Kratochwil 1988; Klotz 1988; Young 1989). Instead of emphasizing continuity this analytical perspective emphasizes change; in the words of Ilya Prigogine and Emanuel Adler it highlights "becoming" rather than "being" (Prigogine 1980; Adler 1987: 2). The "reflective" or "interpretive" critics of realism (Keohane 1989, chapter 7; Tannenwald 1989) insist that societies are always engaged in a process of self-reflection on their historicity. Social change is never ending and engenders a process of self-reflection that is shared and interpretative (Alker 1986). This process is informed by shared norms. It thus amounts to a partly consensual, partly conflictual rewriting of international arrangements and political



practice. Self-reflection does not occur in isolation but is communicated to other societies. Norms are not merely the result of negotiated, instrumental action; they also emerge spontaneously as social practice. And they evolve over time. Thus international conflict and cooperation do not result from a process open to a reductionist logic of analysis that takes interests as given. Instead the preferences of actors are changed by historical experience as are their views of how the world works. Conflict and cooperation thus emerge from a never-ending process of redefining social and political identities that generate consensually shared and contextually appropriate norms that provide standards for action. In international society these standards are called regimes.

In an important article Friedrich Kratochwil and John Ruggie have argued that the core of regime analysis concerns the role of norms in social life (Kratochwil/ Ruggie 1986). Behavior is an inadequate guide to the study of norms. Sovereignty, for example, is a reasonably precise concept, "a question of law, not of fact, of authority, not sheer power. As a legal concept, the principle of sovereignty should not be confused with the empirical claim that a given state makes its decisions autonomously" (Keohane 1989, chapter 7: 115). Norms reflect premises. Their importance lies not in being true or false but in being shared. For these premises create themselves the evidence that confirm their validity (Adler 1988: 15, 22). Norms can be violated by behavior; they cannot be invalidated (Tannenwald 1988: 24). They specify rules rather than regularities (Ruggie 1988: 15). Kratochwil and Ruggie insist that shared meanings must be at the center of any study of norms and regimes. We must thus grasp how actors interpret themselves and the world. Regimes emerge in and through shared interpretations and shared expectations that constitute standards for action. Furthermore norms are a context affecting interest and behavior in complex ways. They cause, guide and inspire action. What matters in the analysis of international regimes is not only the "compliance" of actors with forces that determine their behavior and thus make it amenable to explanation and prediction. What matters also is the "competence" of actors to interpret themselves and the world and to share those interpretations with others.

The point is nicely brought out by Lou Pauly's analysis of the liberalization of the national banking systems in the United States, Canada, Australia and Japan. Pauly has shown convincingly how, on the basis of reciprocity, tacit agreements have emerged through changes in domestic regulations (Pauly 1988). Foreign banks are not discriminated against in national markets if national banks are not disadvantaged in the respective foreign market. The slow convergence of unilateral national regulation of banks on the basis of reciprocity has created a new international regime. Governments are signalling silently their agreement with a new norm. Pauly's book illustrates that in this case we are not simply dealing with a situation of tit-for-tat, of the tacit coordination of partially conflicting strategies (Axelrod 1984). Instead Pauly also relies on anthropological studies and on studies of customary law to point to the limits of neo-realist analysis of international regimes. He is thus able to illustrate the malleability of interests. New norms result in a redefinition of interests.

In this illustrative example, as in most cases, it is impossible to sort out unambiguously the extent to which policy was driven by national interests or international norms. It thus is very difficult to determine whether international regimes are strong or weak, whether norms are redefining interests or whether interests are bypassing norms. Yet this is the stringent test that neo-realists often seek to impose on the evidence. Only instances where norms override interests are accepted as rejections of the neo-realist perspective. Since causation in most cases is impossible to establish, the analytical categories of neo-realism help little in empirical research. Indeed they may be positively harmful if the numerous instances of overdetermination are chalked up as evidence supporting the neo-realist perspective. The crucial question is not to establish whether interests prevail over norms or whether norms prevail over interests. What matters rather is a better understanding of the role norms play in influencing how actors define their interests. This cannot be done with dichotomous categories that distinguish between norms and interests. Tracing the policy process makes it possible instead to uncover how interests are defined and redefined. This is feasible in crisis situations which can lead to cognitive and emotional changes of elites confronting hard

choices. But it should also work in comparing the implicit premises of policy over longer time spans. To put it differently, what matters theoretically, understanding how interests are defined in different contexts, can be accomplished in research through descriptive studies.

The interpretative perspective suggests that we cannot analyze regimes without understanding the values, beliefs, and knowledge of actors. Articulating this position theoretically is one thing. Translating it into a feasible research project is quite another. Keohane has argued persuasively that "the greatest weakness of the reflective school lies not in deficiencies in their critical arguments but in the lack of a clear reflective research program ... until reflective scholars or others sympathetic to their arguments have delineated such a research program and shown in particular studies that it can illuminate important issues in world politics, they will remain on the margins of the field" (Keohane 1989, chapter 7: 121). Ernst Haas for one has shown that fruitful empirical work along these lines is possible. For many years Haas has insisted on the importance of social learning and consensual knowledge, especially in the areas of science and technology, for political choice and newly emerging patterns of world politics (Haas 1980, 1983, 1990). For Haas politics is part of a larger process in the historical evolution of multiple meanings. That process both shapes and is shaped by the interaction of physical change in nature, consciousness change in culture, and, bridging nature and culture, knowledge change in science.

Emanuel Adler has argued persuasively that this evolution in meaning can be analyzed empirically as elements of individual ideology as well as collective consciousness (Adler 1987, 1988). Ideologies are sets of beliefs and expectations based on perceptions of reality. "From the individual viewpoint, then, the actor attaches the stigma 'real' to social situations that are both *perceived* and *interpreted*, and these situations are then real in their consequences for what people do" (Adler 1987: 16). Ideologies tell individual actors what their goals are. But since individual actors relate to others in institutions, they transcend the realm of subjectivity and become part of a set of group beliefs or collective consciousness. "Ideology thus ceases to be a mental phenomenon and becomes a collective product of the mind ...

that can have real consequences" (Adler 1987: 17). These consequences often take institutional form. "Consciousness cannot help but become integrated into institutional designs ... institutions are but 'carriers' for a particular collective understanding that has consequences of its own" (Adler 1987: 11, 15). Institutionalized collective consciousness recreates habits of interpretations (Rosenau 1986). Such habits are changeable, and as Peter Hall has illustrated for the case of British economic policy, we can measure the magnitude of change depending on the stakes in political conflicts: the particular settings of policy instruments, the instruments themselves or the hierarchy of goals which the instruments are supposed to serve (Hall 1988: 6-8). The compliance of actors with norms is less telling than the justifications proffered for compliance. And publicly available statements of purpose and reason are more relevant evidence than the thoughts and motivations of individual policy makers (Klotz 1988: 47). This line of argument points to data and methods which are "soft" and "interpretative" and thus different from the "hard", "behavioral" data and methods used by realist scholars.

But it would be wrong to overemphasize the difference. Realists rely on Krasner's definition of regimes which refers specifically to *implicit* norms (Krasner 1983: 2). This formulation grants researchers a wide measure of latitude in the type of evidence which they collect and in the methods they use. Interpretative scholars should be very comfortable with the widely accepted definition of regimes - provided they tire of European social theory, shed their disdain for data and respond to the itch to do some empirical work.

Furthermore such work need not necessarily be restricted to the world of linguistics, literary criticism and legal philosophy from which interpretative scholars have drawn their theoretical insights. The analysis of cultural norms that lies at the core of international regimes is in fact amenable to the causal analysis favored by variants of realist analysis. Norms are abstract but also real. They have intended or unintended consequences. In a brilliant article Ann Swidler has argued persuasively that we should look at these norms as parts of a tool kit of world-views that people rely on to solve particular problems (Swidler 1986). Culture is a set of skills and

habits rather than a set of preferences or values motivating action. Culture provides a way for organizing action rather than specifying the ends of action. Interest-driven explanations favored by realists suffer from the same weakness as value-driven explanations of interpretative scholars. Both assume the ends of action: "rational", individualistic, arbitrary preferences or "irrational", consensual, cultural values. Both fail to recognize that individual action is always an integral part of a much longer sequence, constituting a repertoire of action. These repertoires depend among others on habits and world views. Norms influence action through selecting prefabricated links from which people choose; they do not influence action by prescribing the ends of action. Indeed the styles or strategies of action are more persistent than the ends which individuals or groups seek to attain.

Neo-realists draw a sharp distinction between a decentralized, anarchic, normless international system and a centralized, ordered, domestic one. For the critics of neo-realism this difference is relatively unimportant (Young 1989; Kratochwil 1984: 689). For them most sectors of international politics, like domestic politics, are penetrated fully by norms. International regimes are social institutions. They are thus only one example among many which afford us an arena for investigating the central role that norms play in social and political life. These norms do not only constrain actors in negotiated settings by changing the matrix of incentives. They also enable actors, arise spontaneously and evolve over time. International regimes are not only variables which govern behavior by altering the strategies with which state actors pursue their interests. They also provide a context that makes it possible for actors, through the use of practical reasoning, to define their interests in the first place. International regimes do not simply regulate behavior. They also interpret behavior and thus give meaning and significance to political action (Upham 1987: 205). In contrast to neo-realism *raison d'état* is not simply a premise of political analysis. It is also the result of a process of social interpretation and communication. Norms are important mechanisms in order to solve the inevitable problems which recur in the process of social and political interaction.

#### IV. Implications

The different theoretical positions that I have outlined are summarized schematically in Table 1. The first dimension distinguishes between the neo-realist view of the state as an actor and other theoretical orientations that view the state as a structure of institutional and political components. The second dimension differentiates between the neo-liberal conception of regimes as variables that affect how political interests can best be pursued and alternative theoretical perspectives that emphasize how regimes create the context that makes possible the prior process of interest definition. The question we pose will determine which combination of theoretical approaches is most fruitful. For an analysis of change in the international system the new institutionalism and the interpretative approach articulate two lines of reasoning that offer a promising combination. Focusing on how state structures and the normative context influence the process by which interests are defined may help in countering the static character which is built into the basic categories of the major variants of realist analysis.

**Table 1: States and Regimes**

		States viewed as	
		Actors	Structures
Regimes viewed as	Variables	New Realism and New Liberalism	New Institutionalism
	Context	Interpretative Approach	New Institutionalism and Interpretative Approach

The two analytical perspectives that I have privileged in this discussion overlap. State structures, like regimes, contain normative elements. And the regime context, like state structures, can take an institutional form. But there remains a difference in relative weighting. The new institutionalism takes relatively little account of normative elements of state structures. And regime analysis was developed precisely because it wanted to uncover the norms and principles that make cooperation possible even where no institutions exist. Both perspectives take, however, as problematic what variants of realism take as a given: the complex interaction between structures and norms that lead to distinctive definitions of interest and particular policy choices.

But the two perspectives also intersect. John Ruggie among others has pointed to the generative aspects of the international system (Ruggie 1983, 1988; Duvall/ Wendt 1988). Sovereignty defines important aspects of state structures. Put strongly, it constitutes states in the international system. And as John Meyer has argued forcefully, it also legitimates states in the modern world (Meyer 1980; Thomas/ Meyer 1980). At the same time distinctive state structures shape the international system. As Samuel Huntington has argued in a seminal essay, the spread of transnational organizations since 1945 developed largely out of American national organizations, both governmental and non-governmental (Huntington 1973: 338, 342-345). Access to foreign societies became as important as accords with foreign governments. America expanded into the international system not by controlling foreign people and resources but by deploying American people and resources. American expansion was distinguished not by the acquisition of foreign territory and the power to control but by the penetration of foreign society and the freedom to operate. This expansion was quintessentially American: segmental, pluralistic and operational. By and large it was not colonial. The mechanisms of American expansion were variegated and involved a mixture of coercion, competition and social learning (Ikenberry 1987). In contemporary world politics state structures and international norms thus seek to accommodate two requirements: accords between sovereign states and access to foreign societies. This makes the definition of national

interests problematic. For the demarcation between state structures and international norms has become blurred.

One reason for the substantial difference between realism and the theoretical position I advance here lies in the fact that the institutionalist and the interpretative perspective do not require us to make a sharp analytical distinction between domestic and international affairs. Drawing such a distinction has been recognized as a substantial disadvantage of the realist view. Haggard and Simmons, for example, criticize as an overriding shortcoming the neglect of the domestic factors which shape how state interests are defined (Haggard/ Simmons 1987: 513-517). Similarly, Keohane and Nye insist that analysis of regime change must include a tracing of domestic decision-making (Keohane/ Nye 1987: 739, 743).

Structural realism has left its imprint on the neo-realist and neo-liberal variants that I have summarized. Both seek to simplify analysis by all but disregarding the domestic causes and consequences of international politics. This is not necessarily inherent in the realist perspective. John Ikenberry, Michael Mastanduno and David Lake, for example, in a recent paper seek to develop some hypotheses about the international and domestic policy choices of different kinds of states (Ikenberry/ Mastanduno/ Lake 1989). They make plausible taxonomic distinctions that bridge the analytical divide between international and domestic politics: between weak and strong states in international politics and hard and soft ones in domestic politics; between the goals of power and wealth in international politics and the goals of control over resources and the preservation of legitimacy in domestic politics; and between strategies of extraction and validation in international politics and mobilization and extraction in domestic politics. The paper's title accurately summarizes its analytical perspective. "Toward a Realist Theory of State Action" rests on the conception of the state as an actor in international and, to some extent, in domestic politics. In a similar vein Robert Putnam has also illustrated that one can think creatively about "two-level games" linking domestic and international affairs (Putnam 1988). But in his formulation interests are fixed rather than open to various interpretations. And Putnam disregards the expectations and values that



governments transmit internationally. If it requires relinquishing the conception of unitary state actors with fixed interests, even imaginative variants of realist theory will be very reluctant to incorporate domestic politics into their models. Theoretical parsimony is preferred to empirical richness.

Institutionalists have a different orientation towards theory, conceive of the state in terms of structures, and consider the definition of interests as problematic. Bridging the gap between international and domestic politics thus is a pressing task for this theoretical perspective. Irrespective of the weight attached to state and society, the analysis of domestic structures has sought to illuminate the close links between domestic constraints and opportunities and international behavior. Analogously, a substantial amount of work was inspired by Peter Gourevitch's suggestion to investigate systematically the effects of different kinds of international structures on domestic politics and policy (Gourevitch 1978).

The interpretative approach also embraces both domestic and international politics. It has, for example, offered a plausible criticism of the realist view of sovereignty which is grounded in a sharp distinction between international and domestic politics. Since this criticism has to date remained at a very high level of abstraction, Adler's work is particularly useful in showing how the interpretative approach could be extended in empirical work to encompass both domestic and international affairs. For Adler foreign policy is a "process by which intellectual innovations are carried by domestic institutions and selected by political processes to become the descriptive and normative set of understandings of what it takes to advance the nation's power, influence, and wealth ... We can find the sources of collective learning in international relations at the national level ... nations transmit to each other the political innovations that have been selectively retained at the national level. Power plays a crucial role in both domestic selection and international diffusion processes" (Adler 1988: 10). With this theoretical orientation it may be feasible to go beyond the realist investigation of the form of international regimes, for example their strength or extent, and to analyze as well their content or effects (Haggard/ Simmons 1987; Tannenwald 1988: 14).

I have tried to argue two different positions. Neo-realism is based on a theory of the state that is contradicted by a substantial body of empirical evidence informing the "new institutionalism". And its analysis of international regimes is too narrow and should be integrated into a broader theoretical perspective. I am not arguing that neo-realism is wrong. State actors are sometimes of great importance in international politics. And international regimes do affect the pursuit of state interests. When preferences are fixed the highly restrictive assumptions of neo-realism lead to useful insights. But for an analysis of the changing position of states in the international system the static analytical categories of realism are inadequate. They take as given what needs to be explained: the sources and content of interests that governments pursue. The new institutionalism and the interpretative approach offer more promising ways for illuminating change in world politics.

## V. Conclusion

For an understanding of change in the international system realism and its variants, I have argued, is incomplete. In the search for parsimony realism encourages scholars to adopt categories of analysis that assume the existence of states as unitary actors pursuing interests assumed to be unproblematic. A considerable body of research, however, suggests that states are rarely unitary actors and are often best thought of as structures. Furthermore, the process by which interests are defined is not always unproblematic but may often be adequately grasped by analyzing the context which norms provide.

A European historical perspective is embodied in the analytical categories of realism. The logic of the Western system blinds us to important changes in contemporary international politics. We may thus be better off to derive our categories in part from the international systems of other empires: Ottoman, Moghul or Chinese. In contrast to the Western system the principle of state autonomy was in these cases modulated by complex arrangements of normative obligations, fiscal dependencies and military vulnerabilities. States

were not self-contained actors. And the process by which they defined their interests was problematic. Neo-realism views the international state system as horizontally ordered between similar states. A variant of neo-marxism views the international economy as vertically organized between core and peripheral economies. Such simple categories help us little to grasp a complex international system experiencing rapid change. It is therefore tempting to improve our understanding of change in international politics with analytical categories informed by historical experiences that transcend the limited European experience.

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