The Paradigm of Critical Theory

1. Student Presentation
   Topic: Constructivism
   Speakers: xxx xxx

2. Pedigree of the Critical Theory Paradigm

The paradigm of critical theory is a new member of the IR theory family. It emerged and claimed attention only during the fourth debate as we have introduced.

Please recall, when we introduced the fourth debate, we have been aware of that some scholars labeled the debate as inter-paradigm debate, some others labeled the debate as neorealism vs. neoliberalism along with constructivism vs. deconstructivism, still others labeled the debate as a debate of rationalism vs. reflectivism, or problem-solving theory vs. critical theory.

The critical theory is a kind of reflectivism, while most of other theories including realism and liberalism are rationalism, or problem-solving theory.
- Rationalism means developing theory through rational inference based on reason and knowledge rather than on belief or emotional response.
- Comparatively, reflectivism means that the method or theory in the studies of international politics should take account of itself or of the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on what is being investigated.
- The critical theorists believe that, a generalized theory based on historical, philosophical, or behavioral methods as realism and liberalism do is impossible to achieve.
- Theory is situated in a particular time and place, conditioned by ideological, cultural, and sociological influences.
- There is no single objective reality, only multiple realities based on individual experiences and perspectives.
- This is one major characteristic that distinguishes the critical theory from other paradigms.
- And based on this approach, the critical theory poses a challenge to the traditional theories of realism and liberalism, and substantially modifies radicalism.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the critical theory paradigm is that, it rooted neither in
politics as the realist and liberal paradigms are, nor in economics as the radical paradigm is, but in sociology.

- In a sense, the critical theory is a result of studying international politics by sociological methodology.
- This is especially true to constructivism as one component of the critical theory paradigm.
- The most eminent constructivism theorist Alexander Wendt titles his book as *Social Theory of International Politics*. And he bases his analysis of international politics primarily on social theories.
- That is why constructivism is also labeled as social constructivism.

Constructivism:
- As a scholarly approach to inquiry, constructivism emphasizes the importance of agents (people and groups) and the shared meanings they construct to define their identities, interests, and institutions – understandings that influence their international behavior.
- As an alternative international relations theory, constructivism hypothesizes how ideas, norms, and institutions shape state identity and interests.

Constructivism has been further classified by some scholars and three variants identified – conventional, interpretative and critical/radical.
- Conventional constructivism, which is the school dominant in the US, examines the role of norms and identity in shaping international political outcomes. These scholars are largely positivist in epistemological orientation and strong advocates of bridge building among diverse theoretical perspectives; the qualitative, process-tracing case study is their methodological starting point. Sociology and elements of institutional/organizational theory are sources of theoretical inspiration.
- The interpretative and critical/radical variants of constructivism, in contrast, enjoy greater popularity in Europe.
- Interpretative constructivists typically ask how to sort possible questions; they are committed to a deeply inductive research strategy that targets the reconstruction of state/agent identity, with the methods encompassing a variety of discourse-theoretical techniques.
- Critical/radical constructivists add an explicitly normative dimension by probing a researcher’s own implication in the reproduction of the identities and world he/she is studying. Discourse-theoretical methods are again emphasized; however, there is a greater emphasis on the power and domination inherent in language.
- For both interpretative and critical constructivists, key sources of theoretical inspiration lay in
linguistic approaches and continental social theory.

However, constructivism is not the only member of the critical theory family, despite the most important one. Besides constructivism, other perspectives such as post-modernism, post-positivism, deconstructivism, and feminism are all reflectivism and are all family members of the critical theory paradigm.

Post-modernism, post-positivism, and deconstructivism take similar views and are basically different names of same approach.
 - They postulate that the complexity of the world system renders precise description impossible, and that the purpose of scholarship is to understand actors’ hidden motives by deconstructing their textual statements.

Feminism emphasizes gender in the study of world politics. It is a body of scholarship emerging from the social feminist movement to promote the political equality of women with men, critiquing sexual biases, and challenging gender roles that encourage female subordination and warfare.

Wendt also includes neo-Marxism as a family member of the critical theory.

The family of critical theory then can be illustrated as following figure.
Among various schools of the critical theory, constructivism (conventional) is the most influential and best developed one. In the following analysis of the critical theory, we will focus on constructivism, as delineated in Wendt’s *Social Theory of International Politics*.

3. Perspectives at Three Levels of Analysis

Remember, as reflectivism other than rationalism, the critical theory in general and constructivism in particular does not develop theoretical hypotheses and arguments by postulating theoretical assumptions.

- Constructivism does not drive from rational inference but from criticism of rationalism including both realism and liberalism.

- Despite no assumptions on three levels of analysis, constructivists, on the other hand, do have their opinions on individual, state, and international system.

- And, most of constructivist perspectives at three levels of analysis are counter-arguments against assumptions of the realist paradigm.

At the individual level,

- The critical theory sees individuals, especially elites, as major units and most important actors of international politics. Individual elites are especially important in constructivist thinking.

- In constructivist perspective, ideas and discourses are not formed in the grass roots, but spread by transnational elites, or “epistemic communities,” who play a key role in transforming language and discourse about international politics.

- Individuals form groups and socially construct images of international conditions. Therefore social groups and collective identities are also actors in international area.

- The motives of actors are contingent upon the socially constructed explanations about the basic drives of international actors.

- Feminist theory criticizes realism ignoring the importance of gender as a factor in world politics, depersonalizing the state-centered account of foreign policy, and excluding women in discussions about public and international affairs.

At the state level,

- The major theoretical proposition that all constructivists subscribe to is that state behavior is shaped by elite beliefs, collective identities, and social norms.

- Robert Cox: “The state has not physical existence, like a building or a lamp-post; but it is
nevertheless a real entity. It is a real entity because everyone acts as though it were.”

- Individuals in collectivities forge, shape, and change culture through ideas and practices.
- State behavior and national interests are the result of the social identities of these actors.
- Like the realists and neoliberal institutionalists, constructivists see power as important. But whereas the former just see power in material terms (military, economic, political), constructivists also see power in discursive terms – the power of ideas, culture, and language.
- Constructivists see sovereignty not as an absolute, but as a contested concept. They point out that states have never had exclusive control over territory but that state sovereignty has always been challenged and is being challenged continuously by new institutional forms and new national needs. Conceptualizations of sovereignty are constantly shifting and the multiple meanings of sovereignty are conditioned by time, place, and historical circumstances.
- Postmodernists question the whole notion of states as well. They view the notion of states as a fiction constructed by scholars. They contend that states do not act in regularized ways, but are known only through the stories told about them, filtered through the perspectives of the story tellers.

At the international system level,

- Constructivists disdain the realist concept of structure.
- One of the most well-known constructivist theorists, Alexander Wendt, argues that political structure of the realist paradigm, whether one of anarchy or a particular distribution of material capabilities, explains nothing.
- It tells us little about state behavior: "It does not predict whether two states will be friends or foes, will recognize each other's sovereignty, will have dynastic ties, will have revisionist or status quo powers, and so on."
- What we need to know is identity, and identities change as a result of cooperative behavior and learning.
- Whether the system is anarchic depends on the distribution of identities, not the distribution of military capabilities, as the realist would have us believe.
- If a state identifies only with itself, then the system may be anarchic. If a state identifies with other states, then there is no anarchy.
- The most famous motto of Wendt is that “Anarchy is what states make of it.”
- That means anarchy has multiple meanings for different actors based upon their own communities of intersubjective understandings and practices.
- Constructivists also argue that there is no relevant distinction between the international system
and the state or between international politics and domestic politics and no distinction between endogenous and exogenous sources of change.

4. Theoretical Hypotheses and Arguments

Based on these perspectives at three levels of analysis, constructivists develop key concepts, basic hypotheses, and major theories central to the paradigm of critical theory.

Theorizing about Theory

Constructivists share post-modernists’ skepticism of the possibility to render precise description, explanation, and prediction on complex international politics.
- They believe there is no point in attempting to develop a shared conception of the world.
- There exists no single general-purpose theory able to account for all questions regarding international relations.
- Constructivists and other critical theorists have returned to reconsider the basic questions of epistemology that are fundamental to evaluating the relative value and validity of rival theoretical frameworks.
- How do we know what to believe? What principles of analysis can lead us to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of various theories? How do we separate fact from fiction and sense from nonsense? What is the relative descriptive accuracy and explanatory power of different theories, and how much confidence should be placed in their explanations of world politics? To what extent, in short, should we accept the perspective of any theory such as realism or liberalism, and the claims all such theories make about what should count as knowledge of international affairs?
- To interpret both international life and the various substantive theories others have built to help understand international affairs, constructivism increasingly becomes what many students of international politics turn to.
- As Wendt himself admits, strictly speaking, “constructivism is not a theory of international politics”; rather, it helps to “clarify the differences and relative virtues” of alternative theories.

Beyond that, constructivism provides a lens for thinking critically about how theories of international relations can be constructed, and the kinds of premises and assumptions that are reasonable for any theorist to make as a starting point for explaining world politics.
- Wendt argues that theories of international politics are often contested on the basis of ontology (ideas about the nature of existence) and epistemology (how knowledge is acquired).
- While realists maintain that there is an objective and knowable world, which is separable from the observing individual. Critical theorists, on the other hand, see subject and object in the historical world as reciprocally interrelated whole, and they deny the possibility of objective knowledge.
- Where realists see a fixed and knowable world, constructivists see the possibility of endless interpretations of the world before them.
- Richard Ashley: “There are no constants, no fixed meanings, no secure grounds, no profound secrets, no final structures or limits of history … there is only interpretation … History itself is grasped as a series of interpretations imposed upon interpretation – none primary, all arbitrary.”
- The key to critical theory is the purpose they see to theorizing: it is not to give advice to policy-makers, or even to business and others in positions of power and authority.
- Central to this purpose is that postmodernists do not accept the world as they find it, but rather ask how what they find came about and whose interests does it serve.

Based on this special ontology and epistemology, constructivists turn to discourse analysis to answer the questions of international politics.
- They trace the impact of ideas on shaping identities;
- They analyze culture, norms, procedures, and social practices;
- They probe how identities are shaped and change over time.
- They use texts, interviews, and archival material, as well as research local practices by riding public transportation and standing in lines, to create thick description.
- For example, the case studies in The Culture of National Security edited by Peter Katzenstein utilize this approach. By studying Soviet foreign policy at the end of the Cold War, German and Japanese security policy from militarism to antimilitarism, and Arab national identity, the authors search for security interests defined by actors who are responding to changing cultural factors.
- These studies show how social and cultural factors shape national security policy in ways that contradict realist or liberal expectations.

Ideas, Identities, and Interests

One distinct characteristic of constructivism is its emphasis on power of ideas and identities.
- The role of idea and identity is the most important issue dividing critical theory and realism.
- Critical theory strongly criticizes realism’s failure to pay attention to the powerful role of ideas and norms in world politics. While realism emphasizes power and interests, constructivism stresses ideas and identities.

- Like the realists and neoliberal institutionalists, constructivists see power as important. But whereas the former just see power in material terms (military, economic, political), constructivists also see power in discursive terms – the power of ideas, culture, and language.

- To critical theorists, power is more than brute force; ideas are a form of power.

- Constructivists believe in the power of knowledge, ideas, culture, ideology, and language, that is, discourse, or how we think and talk about the world.

- The discursive power is the power to produce intersubjective meanings within social structures, which in turn constitute social structures and actors alike.

Though constructivism argues that both material and discursive power are necessary for any understanding of world affairs, constructivists insist that the object of study is the norms and practices of individuals and the collectivity, with no distinction made between domestic politics and international politics.

- A theater fire is a simple analogy offered by constructivists (Ted Hopf).

- The story is a fire in a theater where all run for the exits. But absent knowledge of social practices of constitutive norms, structure, even in this seemingly overdetermined circumstance, is still indeterminate. Even in a theater with just one door, while all run for that exit, who goes first? Are they the strongest or the disabled, the women or the children, the aged or the infirm, or is it just a mad dash? Determining the outcome will require knowing more about the situation than about the distribution of material power or the structure of authority. One will need to know about the culture, norms, institutions, procedures, rules, and social practices that constitute the actors and the structure alike.

- By this story, constructivists attempt to illustrate that structural factors are not the main determinants of state behavior as realists claim. On the contrary, structural factors only have some minor influences; state behavior is shaped by elite beliefs, identities, and social norms; ideas and discourse are the driving forces that shape the world.
Constructivists contend that ideas and identities shape state behavior by defining national interests.

- The common belief of constructivists is that, the structure leads actors to redefine their interests and identities in the process of interacting, and discourse shapes how political actors define interests and thus modify their behavior.

- In constructivist perspective, the interest of states is not fixed, but is malleable and ever changing, and is not unitary, but is multiple.

- National interests are multiple and changing because national interests are defined by national identities which are multiple and changing.

- Identities tell you and others who you are and they tell you who others are.

- In telling you who you are, identities strongly imply a particular set of interests or preferences with respect to choices of actions in particular domains, and with respect to particular actions.

- Interests are the product of identity. The identity of state implies its preferences, concerns, and consequent actions. That is, having the identity “great power” indicates a particular set of interests different form those indicated by the identity “member of European Union.”

- A state reproduces its own identity by repeatedly seeking its corresponding interests and conducting matching activities. A state also understands others according to the identity it attributes to them. (e.g. eagle eyeing dragon)

- Wendt identifies four forms of identity: “corporate,” “type,” “role,” and “collective.” The first two develop through processes within the state, reflecting the self-organizing aspect of the unit, and do not require the recognition of other states for their meaning. Role and collective identities, on the other hand, are constituted only through interaction between states.

- Realists assume that all units in international politics have only one meaningful identity, that of self-interested states. In other words, the state in international politics, across time and space, is assumed to have a single eternal meaning.

- Constructivists instead treat identity as multiple and assume that the selves, or identities, of states are a variable, depending on historical, cultural, political, and social context. (The U.S. identities: great power, imperialist, hegemon, enemy, ally, democracy, etc.)

- Constructivists thus do not think national interest is pre-given and do not think state behavior is predetermined.

- That is why the same state is many different actors in international politics and different states
behave differently toward other states.
- To understand both behavior and interests of states, you must understand their various identities.

Identities   Interests   Behaviors

Identities, Cultures, and International Structures

Constructivists are also structuralists, as neorealists are.
- Constructivists disdain the realist concept of structure just because neorealism is not structural enough.
- Neorealists only emphasize the effects of structures on state behavior by the metaphor of market.
- But they ignore that structures also constitute state identities and interests and that actors also constitute structures.
- Constructivists contend that state interests are product of identities, identities are in important part constructed by structures, and agents and structures are mutually constituted. Structures constitute actors in terms of their interests and identities, but structures are also produced, reproduced, and altered by the discursive practices of agents.
- For example, the identity of the United States in the Vietnam War was a great power. This identity determined American interest was in military intervention in Vietnam’s civil conflict not appeasement. By engaging intervention, the U.S. reproduced its own identity of great power, as well as the structure that gave meaning to its action. So, U.S. intervention in Vietnam perpetuated the international intersubjective understanding of great powers as those states that use military power against others.

Structures   Identities   Interests   Behaviors   Structures

Therefore, to constructivists, intersubjective norms and practices are critical to the meaning of structure. In other words, without an intersubjective social context, structure becomes meaningless.
- Anarchy as structure assumed by the realist paradigm is such a meaningless structure.
- Constructivists argue anarchy is as indeterminate as the theater fire; it is a structure mutually constituted by actors in a certain social context.
- In Wendt’s words, “Anarchy is what states make of it,” implying that there are many different understandings of anarchy in the world, so state actions should be more varied then only self-help.
- Taking anarchy as a constant given, neorealists think the structure of the international system is only made of a distribution of material capabilities.
- Constructivists disagree. They think the structure is also made of social relationships – shared knowledge, material resources, and practices are three elements of social structure.
- Constructivists conclude that the key structures in the state system are not material, but instead are intersubjective and social, whether the system is anarchic and self-help depends on the distribution of ideas and identities.

According to the distribution of ideas and identities, constructivists identify three kinds of international structures exemplified by three cultures.
- The situation of the distribution of identities in international arena is indicated by the degree of collective identities or shared identities across agents or actors.
- And collective identities are indicated by international cultures.
- According to Wendt, whether a system is conflictual or peaceful is a function not of anarchy and power but of the shared culture created through discursive social practices.
- Constructivists argue that culture is self-fulfilling prophecy. Culture determines how a state identifies itself, how this state identifies others, and how this state is identified by others, in one word, how states identify each other. Culture therefore determines the existence and degree of collective identities. Different cultures indicate different international structures.
- Constructivists distinguish three such “cultures of anarchy” – Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian – that have characterized at various times the past two thousand years of international relations, each of which corresponds to a specific international structure. (see following figure)

- The Hobbesian culture, according to Wendt, dominated world affairs until the seventeenth century, in which states cast each other in the role of “enemy.”
- States identify negatively with each other’s security so that ego’s gain is seen as alter’s loss. States see others as threatening adversaries that will observe no limits on the use of violence. Violence must therefore be employed as a basic tool for survival.
- Negative identification under anarchy constitutes systems of “realist” power politics: risk-averse
actors that infer intentions from capabilities and worry about relative gains and losses.

- In this “competitive” security system, the world is seen as a jungle with the Hobbesian war of all against all and collective action is nearly impossible.

- Therefore what the Hobbesian culture shaped is an anarchic, egoist, and self-help structure that confirms the realist paradigm.

- The Lockean culture has characterized the modern state system since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, in which states view each other as “rivals.”

- States do not positively identify the security of self with that of others but instead treat security as the individual responsibility of each. States are indifferent to the relationship between their own and others’ security.

- States are still self-regarding about their security but are concerned primarily with absolute gains rather than relative gains. States may use violence to advance their interests, but that are required to refrain from eliminating each other.

- This constitutes the “individualistic” security system, in which one’s position in the distribution of power is less important, and collective action is more possible (though still subject to free riding because states continue to be “egoists”).

- The anarchic, self-help, but cooperative structure shaped by the Lockean culture confirms the liberal paradigm.

- The Kantian culture has emerged only recently in relations between democracies, in which states play the role of “friends.”

- States identify positively with one another so that the security of each is perceived as the responsibility of all. States do not use force to settle disputes and work as a team against security threats.

- Positive identification constitutes a “cooperative” security system, in which cooperation is not only possible but also desirable; security practices become increasingly altruistic and reciprocal; collective action is less dependent on the presence of active threats and less prone to free riding.

- This security system is not self-help in any interesting sense, since the “self” in terms of which interests are defined is the community; national interests are international interests.

- The international structure shaped by the Kantian culture is not a self-help but an other-help structure, though still anarchic, that confirms the constructivist paradigm.

From Hobbesian culture to Kantian culture, from the most conflictual structure to the most
cooperative structure, the international system changes over time.

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**Norms, Institutions, and Security Community**

Given the international system is not necessarily anarchic and self-help as the realist paradigm describes, actors may not be doomed to live in a dull, pessimistic, and Hobbesian style world.

The expectation of constructivists is to create a more harmonious and peaceful international system.

- Specifically, they aim to transform the international system into a “world society,” where states are guided by “norms of trust and sharing.”
- Their goal is to relegate security competition and war to the trash heap of history, and create instead a genuine “peace system,” a “cooperative security system,” or a “pluralistic security community.”

As we have introduced, the concept of “pluralistic security community” is borrowed from Karl Deutsch, according to whom, the key characteristics of a “pluralistic security community” are three-fold.
- (1) within its frame, states no longer resort to force as a means of asserting their respective interests (non-violent problem solving),
- (2) the members of the community hold the same basic political values (mutually accepted
values),
- (3) the members of the community behave in a way which the other members can predict (dependable expectations).

Constructivists see a “pluralistic security community” as a genuine “peace system,” in which
- State would renounce the use of military force.
- There would be “a generally shared expectation of peaceful change.”
- States would “identify positively with one another so that the security of each is perceived as the responsibility of all.”
- State would not think in terms of self-help or self-interest, but would instead define their interest in terms of the international community. In this new world, “national interests are international interests.”
- States would behave according to the same norms or institutions that underpin collective security.
- But pluralistic security community is better than collective security, since there do not appear to be any troublemaker states in a pluralistic security community, as there might be in a collective security system.

To achieve such a “peace system,” the key is to alter state identity and to transform how states think about themselves and their relationship with other states.
- States must stop thinking of themselves as solitary egoists, and instead develop a powerful communitarian ethos.
- States must stop thinking themselves as separate and exclusive actors (i.e. sovereign), and instead see themselves as mutually conditioned parts of a larger whole.
- States should have a powerful sense of responsibility to the broader international community.
- In short, intersubjective understandings and expectations matter a lot. The constitutive and regulative norms and institutions of the international system must be altered accordingly.

Remember, constructivism argues that identities and discourses are the driving force behind state behavior, thus the way to transform international system is to change drastically the way people think and talk about international politics.

Norms and institutions as intersubjective beliefs play a central role in the process of transforming the fundamental nature of international politics and creating a more cooperative and peaceful
- As we have just discussed, constructivists believe identities, cultures, shared knowledge can alter international structure.
- Constructivists believe that ideational forces or institutions often can change environment.
- “In essence, critical theory holds that social reality is constituted by intersubjective consciousness base on language and that human beings are free to change their world by a collective act of will.” (Markus Fischer)
- “Self-help and power politics are institutions … not essential features of anarchy.” (Wendt)
Therefore they can be changed by a collective act of will too.
- Ideas, identities, and institutions constitute the actors in a situation, and the nature of their relationship, whether conflictual or cooperative.
- For example, a security dilemma as a social structure is composed of intersubjective understandings in which states are so distrustful that they make worst-case assumptions about each other’s intentions, and as a result define their interests in self-help terms.
- A security community, however, is a different social structure, one composed of shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war.
- The structure of shared knowledge can also shape meanings for human action. Norms can explain why most interstate relations are not subject to security dilemma. “By providing meaning, identities reduce uncertainty.” (Ted Hopf)
- For example, 500 British or French nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean or Iranian nuclear weapons, because the British and the French are friends of the United States, the North Koreans and the Iranians are not.
- The dilemma of security can be solved and the security community can be instituted by changing intersubjective understandings.
- Collective identities, either negative or positive, are essential to the structure of the international system.
- Constructivists strongly hold that by casting the other in a non-egoistic light, and acting toward it from an other-regarding standpoint, actors can begin to build collective identities that include the other as part of the definition of self.
- To cultivate and bolster positive and constructive collective identities is a critical step to establish a “pluralistic security community” as a genuine “peace system.”
The paradigm of critical theory as whole can be summarized very briefly as the following table.

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It is worth noting that, the critical theory in general and constructivism in particular has assumed increasing importance in 21st century thinking about IR.

As Wendt summarized, what unites the family of critical theory is a concern with how international politics is “socially constructed,” which involves two basic claims: that the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material (a claim that opposes materialism), and that these structures shape actor’s identities and interests, rather than just their behavior (a claim that opposes rationalism).

- Although a relatively new approach to international relations, critical theory has returned international scholars to the foundational questions, including the nature of the state and the concepts of sovereignty and citizenship.

- Critical theorists share the position that since the world is so complicated, no overarching theory in international relations is possible.
- In addition, the paradigm of critical theory has opened new substantive areas to inquiry, such as the roles of gender and ethnicity, which have been largely absent from international relations approaches.

- Power exists in every exchange among actors, and the goal of constructivists is to find the sources of power. Their unique contribution may well be in elucidating the sources of power in ideas and in showing how ideas shape and change identity.

- Another contribution of critical theory is it offers the boldest critique of both materialism and rationalism, in particular realism, in the field. While at the same time, constructivism offers a socially scientific underpinning for the idealist claim that diplomacy can fundamentally change the way states think about themselves and others.

Nonetheless, the realists do not think the criticism of critical theory is convincing.
- They blame critical theory expecting to create a more harmonious and peaceful international system, but saying little about either the desirability or feasibility of achieving that particular end.
- Constructivism overemphasizes the role of ideas, identities, and discourses, but it fails to explain why discourses rise and fall and why the new discourse – the communitarian discourse – championed by constructivism will not be more malignant than the discourses it replaces.
- Nothing in the theory guarantees, for example, that a fascist discourse far more violent than realism will not emerge as the new hegemonic discourse.

Most important, constructivism does not adequately address a critical aspect of the realist worldview: the problem of uncertainty and deception.
- Wendt’s building of a systemic constructivist theory presents him with an ironic dilemma. It is the very mutability of polities that makes prudent leaders so concerned about the future.
- If diplomacy can have only a limited effect on another’s character or regime type, then leaders must calculate the other’s potential to attack later should it acquire motives for expansion.
- Yet even when states are fairly sure that the other is also a security seeker, they know that it might change its spots later on. States must therefore worry about any decline in their power, lest the other turn aggressive after achieving superiority.
- In such an environment of future uncertainty, levels and trends in relative power will thus act as a key constraint on state behavior.
- In fact, in a spiraling security dilemma, there are two separate beliefs that do not overlap: Ego
thinks Alter is an aggressive enemy, when Alter knows that it is not; and Alter likewise thinks Ego is an aggressive enemy, when Ego knows that it is not. Again, it is what is not shared—the uncertainty in the system—that is problematic.

- The security dilemma, with all its implications, is real and pervasive. It cannot be talked away through better discursive practices. It must be faced.

Undeniably, many of the variables in critical theory are loosely defined. Like liberalism, realism, and radicalism before it, the critical theory is not a uniform theory. Some even question whether it is a substantive theory at all.

6. Chinese Views of the Critical Theory Paradigm

Constructivism, not whole critical theory, is very popular here in China now.

To Chinese scholars, constructivism is helpful because it reminds us that how we think about the world matters. Its method of viewing international politics represents a welcome theoretical departure, because it reminds us that shared images influence the ways actors in the global arena see themselves and behave. Further, this emphasis on subjective beliefs helps us appreciate that the practices in statecraft and the identities of global actors or agents are products of shared ideas rather than, as the realists would have it, simply products of the objective or material structure of the international system.

It is hard to argue against the principle of constructivism that international reality is defined by the ways people construct their images of it. The underlying premises have made social constructivism so popular. As we move into the twenty-first century, it is likely to become increasingly popular to interpret world politics from a constructivist theory that focuses on the collective norms and culture of people and state actors.

Besides the inherent premises of the constructivist theory, another attractiveness that makes constructivism popular is its freshness and novelty. New theory is always attractive, attract people to explore. Many Chinese scholars are very happy to discover the mysteries of constructivism and to introduce its arguments to Chinese audience. Since constructivism is unfamiliar to most elder Chinese scholars, especially university professors, and studying constructivism requires better English command, many Chinese younger scholars, especially college students, prefer to focus
their research on constructivism. Presumably this can help them get better credits and pass dissertation defense.

While most Chinese scholars favor constructivism, they do not share its ontology. The ontology of constructivism is somewhat idealist and contradictory to materialism that was well developed by Marxism and well received by Chinese scholars and policy makers alike. Most Chinese scholars believe there is an objective world and this world is recognizable and understandable. Discourse is mainly a reflection of development in this objective world. If, as constructivists claim, there is no objective reality, if "the world is in the eye of the beholder," then there can be no right or wrong answers, only individual perspectives. That is not reality. Identities and discourses are important but their importance should not be exaggerated.

7. Realist, Liberal, Radical, and Critical Theory Paradigms Compared

We have reviewed four theoretical paradigms of international politics. They deserve a comparison. I bring together four tables of paradigm in brief into one, which may help us have a better understanding on the differences of those theoretical perspectives.
## PARADIGM IN BRIEF

### Contending Theoretical Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The Realist Paradigm</th>
<th>The Liberal Paradigm</th>
<th>The Radical Paradigm</th>
<th>The Paradigm of Critical Theory</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key actors</strong></td>
<td>International system, states</td>
<td>States, international organizations, nongovernmental groups</td>
<td>States, social classes, transnational elites and groups, multinational corporations</td>
<td>Individuals, social groups, collective identities</td>
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<td>states</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>View of the individual</strong></td>
<td>Power seeking; selfish; antagonistic</td>
<td>Basically good; capable of cooperating</td>
<td>Selfish; actions determined by economic class</td>
<td>Major unit, especially elites; motives contingent upon social discourses</td>
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<td><strong>View of the state</strong></td>
<td>Power seeking; principle, unitary and rational actor; sovereign</td>
<td>Not an autonomous actor; not always a rational actor; having many interests</td>
<td>An agent of the structure of international capitalism and the bourgeoisie; not unitary actor; pursuing the interest of the dominant class or classes</td>
<td>State behavior and national interests shaped by elite beliefs, collective norms, and social identities</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>View of the international system</strong></td>
<td>Anarchic; self-help; structured by the distribution of states’ capabilities/power; low change potential; slow structural change</td>
<td>Interdependence among actors; international society; anarchy but possible to mitigate, with elements of order and hierarchy supported by rules and laws; change is probable and a desirable process</td>
<td>Anarchic but highly stratified; a hierarchy of classes and states supported by distribution of wealth; dominated by international capitalist system; cycle of exploitation/dependency; radical change desired</td>
<td>Whether anarchic depends on the distribution of identities, not the distribution of capabilities; nothing explained by international structures alone; belief in evolutionary change</td>
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<td>Core concerns</td>
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<td>War and security; power</td>
<td>Self-help; balance of power; deterrence</td>
<td>Increase power; preserve nuclear deterrence</td>
<td>Anarchy; power; security; interest; polarity;</td>
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<td>and national interests;</td>
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<td>avoid disarmament and super-national</td>
<td>structure; sovereignty</td>
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<td>competition and relative</td>
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<td>gains</td>
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<td>International institution; international</td>
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<td>regime; economic interdependence; cooperation</td>
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<td>Economic prosperity;</td>
<td>Collective security; pluralistic security</td>
<td>Develop regimes and promote democracy and</td>
<td>Class; class struggle; imperialism;</td>
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<td>cooperation and relative</td>
<td>community; democratization; complex</td>
<td>international institutions to coordinate</td>
<td>dependency theory; exploitation;</td>
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<td>gains</td>
<td>interdependence; international</td>
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<td>capitalist world system</td>
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<td>institutions and regimes</td>
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<td>Idea; discourse; identity; culture;</td>
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<td>norms; institution; security community</td>
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<td>Equality and justice, social</td>
<td>Transformation of world politics;</td>
<td>Topple the unfair and unequal international</td>
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<td>progress</td>
<td>abolish capitalism; cooperation</td>
<td>capitalist system and create a new equal</td>
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<td>within transnational classes</td>
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<td>Establishment of a pluralist security</td>
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<td>community by changing norms, institutions,</td>
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<td>and collective identities</td>
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<td>Possibility of theorizing;</td>
<td>Deconstruct concepts; advocate</td>
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<td>gender equality; power of</td>
<td>normative innovation through construction</td>
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<td>ideas and identities; mutual</td>
<td>of new images; cultivate positive</td>
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<td>constitution between agents</td>
<td>collective identities</td>
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<td>and structure</td>
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To have a better understanding of those paradigms, we also need to use them to analyze international events.
- The contending theoretical perspectives discussed in the preceding sections see the world and even specific events quite differently.
- What theorists and policymakers choose to see, what they each seek to explain, and what implications they draw—all these elements of analysis can vary, even though the facts of the event may be the same.
- Analyzing the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq war by using these different theories allows us to compare and contrast the theories in action.

Realist views of the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq war would emphasize the international system of anarchy, where there are few effective constraints on national power save other states.
- The 1991 Gulf War represents yet another case where both major protagonists—Iraq and the United States—were acting out of their respective state interests.
- Iraq saw its vital security in access to the Persian Gulf; it saw its internal economic problems exacerbated by the fall in oil revenues. One way out of these dilemmas was to take over Kuwait, an altogether rational response considering advance hints that the United States would be reluctant to get directly involved.
- Once Iraq did invade and successfully overran Kuwait, the U.S. response was also consistent with its own national interest, according to realist thinking.
- Kuwait’s oil resources (and also neighboring Saudi Arabia’s) are crucial to the United States; these resources had to be kept under the control of friendly powers.
- The job of the United States, as leader of the multinational coalition against Iraq, was to convince other states (most importantly Japan, Great Britain, and France) that it was also in their respective national interests to oust Iraq from Kuwait and punish Iraq for its aggressive action.

- In realist thinking, the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War enhanced stability in the Middle East. The various clients of the superpowers were constrained in their actions by the superpowers.
- The demise of Soviet power, particularly its unwillingness or inability to support Iraq, thus led the Iraqis to try desperate measures that they would not have attempted during the Cold War.
- Realists do not see any new world order, but rather continued instability in an anarchic system. States must be ready and willing to use their full resources to check power with power.

- Realist interpretations of the 2003 Iraq war would focus on state-level and international-level factors.
- Realists see the international system as anarchic, with no international authority and few states other than the United States able and willing to act to rid the world of the Iraq threat.
- Iraq posed a security threat to the United States with its supposed holdings of weapons of mass destruction, and the United States therefore saw a need to eliminate those weapons and at the same time to assure a stable oil supply to the West.
- The only way to achieve these objectives was to oust the Baathist regime from power in Iraq.
- Having escalated its threats and amassed its troops on Iraq's borders to coerce the regime to give up power, the United States had no choice but to act militarily when that coercion failed.

- Yet, not all realists agree that the policy the United States pursued was the correct one. There is an interesting discussion among realists about whether or not the U.S. operation was necessary.
- John Mearsheimer, an offensive realist, and Stephen Walt, a defensive realist, have jointly argued that the war was not necessary.
- They write that any threat posed by Saddam, even his possible attainment of nuclear weapons, could have been effectively deterred by U.S. military power.
- They argue that even if the war went well and had positive long-term consequences, it would be unnecessary and could engender long-term animosity toward the United States within the Middle East region and around the world.
- Realists clearly can draw different policy prescriptions from theory.

In contrast, in examining the 1991 Gulf War, liberals would tend to focus on two features.
- First, a liberal explanation for why the war occurred would concentrate on the individual and state levels of analysis:
- Saddam Hussein misperceived the international community and did not realize that it would respond with a collective use of force.
- He was seeking to redress what he believed to be an illegal situation inherited from the British colonial empire—the independence of Kuwait despite the fact that part of the Kuwaiti oil fields had historically been a part of the southern Iraqi province of Basra.
- He was also reacting to difficulties within Iraq itself—the poor economic situation resulting from Iraq’s 1980-88 war with Iran, reduced oil revenues, and the Kuwaiti refusal to increase oil outflow to make up for that decline in revenues.

- Second, a liberal analysis would emphasize the relative success of the international collective response elicited by Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait.

- To many liberals at the time, the response by the United Nations and the successful formation of a multinational coalition were excellent illustrations of a new world order in which the major powers, as well as many of the developing states, united against an aggressor state.

- The international community had to accept U.S. leadership, yet the United States was also constrained in its actions—it could not do exactly as it pleased—because it had to serve the needs of the world community.

A liberal view of the 2003 Iraq war would also concentrate on the individual and state levels of analysis.

- Saddam was clearly an abusive leader whose atrocities against his own population were made evident in the aftermath of the war with the discovery of mass graves.

- He was aggressive not only against domestic opponents of his regime but against people within the region, and even supported terrorist activities against enemies in the West.

- The United States, as the hegemon in the international system, acted to eliminate the threat that Saddam posed to his own people, to stamp out the material support that the Iraqi regime was providing to terrorist groups, and to install a fledgling democracy.

- These are all arguments that liberals would make.

- On the other hand, with respect to how policies were implemented, many liberals would be dismayed by the lack of international support from the U.N. Security Council.

- In contrast to the 1991 Gulf War, when the United States and the international community were in agreement about how to respond, the 2003 Iraq war revealed a split in the international community that liberals find problematic.

- For many liberal thinkers, the fact that the United States and its coalition acted anyway is unacceptable.

A radical interpretation would tend to focus mainly on the international system structure.
- That system structure, for radicals, is embedded in the historical colonial system and its contemporary legacies.
- Political colonialism spawned an imperialist system in which the economic needs of the capitalist states were paramount.
- In the Middle East, that meant imperialism by the West to secure oil resources.
- In colonial times, imperialism was state organized; today imperialism is practiced by multinational corporations.
- Thus, the international petroleum companies, directly threatened by Iraq’s takeover of Kuwait, pushed the West to counter Iraq’s aggression with force.

- The instability of the oil supply coming from Iraq also explains the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 in this view.
- In the belief of many radicals (and many in the Arab world), the United States wants to control Iraq’s oil.
- They point to the fact that one of the United States’s first military objectives was the seizure of the Rumaila oil field in southern Iraq.
- Oil fields all over the country were protected by U.S. troops even when civil disorder and looting of precious monuments went unchecked.
- Restarting the oil pipelines was given priority over providing for the basic needs of the Iraqi people.

- Radicals, especially world-system and dependency theorists, would not be surprised at all that the core states of the capitalist system—the United States and its allies—responded with force when Iraq threatened their critical interests in oil.
- Nor would they expect the end of the Cold War to make any difference in the structure of the system.
- The major changes in international power relationships that radicals seek—and predict—have not yet come.

Constructivists would explain the two Gulf wars as conflicts between two identities and two loose institutions: Pan-Arabism on the one hand and state sovereignty on the other.
- Pan-Arabism posits the unity of the Arab world, and that security and power are in the hands of the collectivity, namely the Arab world, not specific sovereign states.
- Arab identity has been forged historically through numerous contacts among various members of Arab communities.
- Thus Pan-Arabism represents one nation with common interests and an identity that is distinct from Western beliefs, norms, and institutions.
- On the other hand is state sovereignty, a practice forged historically in which states are prohibited from interfering in the domestic affairs of other states.
- In the Arab Middle East, there is a continual tension between these two identities.

It is important for students to decide for yourselves which explanation, if any, provides the most accurate description of international politics.

As we seek to understand the changing global conditions, we must be humble in recognizing the limitations of our understandings of world politics and at the same time inquisitive about its character.

- The task of interpretation is complicated because the world is itself complex.
- As one scholar frames the challenge: “Conceptually speaking, world affairs today can be likened to a disassembled jigsaw puzzle scattered on a table before us. Each piece shows a fragment of a broad picture that as yet remains indiscernible. Some pieces depict resurgent nationalism; others show spreading democracy; some picture genocide; others portray prosperity through trade and investment; some picture nuclear disarmament; others picture nuclear proliferation; some indicate a reinvigorated United Nations; others show the UN still enfeebled and ineffective; some describe cultural globalization; others predict clashing civilizations. How do these pieces fit together, and what picture do they exhibit when they are appropriately fitted?” (Donald Puchala)

All theories are maps of possible futures.

- Theories can guide us in fitting the pieces together to form an accurate picture.
- However, in evaluating the usefulness of any theory to interpret global conditions, the overview of theoretical paradigms suggests that it would be wrong to oversimplify or to assume that a particular theory will remain useful in the future.
- In our theoretical exploration of international politics, we must critically assess the accuracy of our impressions, avoiding the temptation to embrace one worldview and abandon another without any assurance that their relative worth is permanently fixed.