

Rethinking Anarchy: A Theoretical Debate on Exploring Cooperative Possibilities in International Relations



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Abstract:

This study delves into the challenge of international cooperation within the context of anarchy, examining the contrasting perspectives of Neorealism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism. Neo-realism posits anarchy as a severe constraint, emphasizing power dynamics and a limited scope for cooperation in the self-help system. In contrast, Neoliberalism contends that despite anarchy, institutions and regimes can facilitate cooperation by providing a framework for states to coordinate. Constructivism takes a unique approach, viewing anarchy as socially constructed, suggesting that states can shape their understanding of anarchy and, consequently, influence the possibilities for cooperation. By exploring these diverse theoretical lenses, the study contributes to a nuanced comprehension of the multifaceted nature of international relations and the varied logics of anarchy that impact states' cooperative behavior on the global stage.

Keywords: Anarchy; International Cooperation; Neorealism; Neoliberalism; Constructivism.

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Introduction:

According to the Rationalism (Neorealism & Neoliberalism), “*Anarchy*” is a central concept at the core of their theoretical assumptions about international politics. Neorealism and Neoliberalism acknowledge the constraints that the international system's anarchic nature imposes on the behavior of states. However, the two approaches do not agree that cooperation can be emerged under anarchy. On the other hand, Constructivism does not share with Rationalism its meta-historical stance towards anarchy because it believes that there is more than one logic of anarchy that may characterize the international system, and each logic has different consequences on the behavior of states and their tendency to cooperate. Given the importance of anarchy as a central concept and its relationship to explaining the phenomenon of international cooperation, the study will attempt to address this problem based on the following question: *How does anarchy affect the cooperative behavior of states?*

The study adopts a methodologically pluralistic approach to address the posed question, aiming to unveil the levels of complexity inherent in the phenomenon and illuminate the exchanges and interactions among its components. Consequently, the study remains open to the theoretical contributions of both Rationalism and Constructivism. It avoids being constrained by a one-sided perspective that oversimplifies reality into a single logic, recognizing the need to explore the multifaceted nature of anarchy and its impact on the cooperative behavior of states.

On this basis, the study believes that adopting a single theory does not help in dealing with the phenomenon of international cooperation. Because theory is reductionist by nature since it focuses on one aspect of the phenomenon that is consistent with its ontological position, its conceptual apparatus, and its causal mechanisms, which makes analyzes based on mono-theoretical deficient and unable to deal with the complexity that characterizes international phenomena. In this context, Andrew Moravcsik argues that the increasing complexity of events and phenomena in the world of global politics prevents the adoption of “unicausal” explanations. (Moravcsik, 2003, p. 131) In response to this fact, the study will attempt to discuss the problem of international cooperation under *Anarchy* from a pluralistic perspective.

1. Neorealism and the challenge of cooperation under anarchy

Cynthia Weber argues that the Waltzian thesis about anarchy was a response to a central question raised in the midst of the theorizing movement in IR after World War I: *Why does war occur?*; Kenneth Waltz's argument was that the main cause of war is *Anarchy*. In fact, linking the war with the structure of the international system was due to epistemological considerations that prompted Waltz to propose a more scientific theoretical project, influenced by the results of

the behavioral revolution in social sciences and in the spirit of positivism. (Weber, 2010, p. 15)

Waltz tried to explain how, despite the absence of a world government, the two competing poles in the Cold War period were not drawn into a comprehensive war. according to Neorealism wars between countries may stop from one period to another, but they cannot be completely overcome.

In this context, Cynthia Weber investigates the persistent threat of war between countries. Realists assert that the state's ultimate goal is survival. And on this basis, the best way to maintain survival is to increase power, because power protects countries from each other, and less powerful countries will be vulnerable to attack by other countries. (Weber, 2010, p. 15) The other reason is that realists treat anarchy as an objective reality that cannot be escaped. Therefore, the idea of a global government defended by utopian Idealists does not seem feasible and is not realistic. States interact in a context of mistrust, and therefore every country seeks to increase its power in order to maintain its survival (Weber, 2010, p. 16). This is the logic of working within an anarchic system.

Classical Realism claims that the causes of war are rooted in human nature (Morgenthau, 1993, p. 4), Waltz moved away from this traditional view by paying attention - in the footsteps of Jean-Jacques Rousseau - to social relations. According to Waltz, the way in which social relations are organized is the determining factor of war, not human nature. Therefore, the Neorealists consider international anarchy an expression of bad social relations between sovereign states, which explains the reason of wars. In his book, “Man, the State, and War,” Waltz refers to the relationship between anarchy and conflict: *“In anarchy there is no automatic harmony[...] any state may at any time use force to implement its policies. Because any state may at any time use force, all states must constantly be ready either to counter force with force or to pay the cost of weakness. The requirements of state action are, in this view, imposed by the circumstances in which all states exist.”* (Waltz, 2001, p. 160)

In a state of anarchy there is no higher authority can impose order, and therefore there is no power can prevent states from pursuing their interests through the use of force. Waltz summed up his argument with his famous statement *“wars occur because there is nothing to prevent them”* (Waltz, 2001, p. 232) According to this argument, anarchy reduces states' ability to cooperate; Because there is no higher authority can impose states to cooperate. in these conditions states are more likely to care about their own interests' *“Self-help”*, rather than the collective interests in the system.

International anarchy, as Waltz argues, doesn't just explain the reasons for wars but also why cooperation among states may not occur. Without a global government to enforce order and punish uncooperative states, the likelihood of

cooperation is uncertain. Hence, conflict remains the fundamental characteristic that defines the nature of international relations among states (Weber, 2010, p. 19)

In general, according to Waltz, a state's behavior is determined by how it organizes itself and its position within the system. In a context of international anarchy, every state seeks to maximize its self-interest by maximizing its power, as any state lacking sufficient power remains vulnerable. Conversely, states will seek to maximize their power, just like other states. The disparities in power will make them suspicious of others' intentions and susceptible to their attacks. This competitive pursuit of arming themselves leads to what Waltz refers to as the “security dilemma.” Where States find themselves in a situation similar to the “prisoner's dilemma.” According to him, the race towards arming oneself doesn't necessarily lead to war; if there is a balance of power within the system, it can lead to a state of stability (Weber, 2010, p. 21)

In the same context, John Mearsheimer believes that international politics may not be characterized by constant wars, but there may still be intense security competition, where the possibility of war is constantly present. While cooperation between countries is possible, this cooperation has its limits and is constrained by the logic of security competition, which cannot be eliminated by cooperation regardless of its scale (Jennifer , 2002, p. 68)

According to Neorealism, the involvement of states in cooperative forms such as an alliance aimed at confronting a common threat. for example, is consistent and not contradictory with the concept of anarchy. This is because the logic of self-help on which states rely may find a way to gain survival within the alliance with parties that share a common threat.

To explain the situation in Europe, Mearsheimer argue that the relationships between European countries changed after World War II due to the shift in the international system from multipolarity to bipolarity. In the context of bipolarity, European countries faced a shared danger and threat, represented by the Soviet Union, while the United States served as a common partner. (Jennifer , 2002, p. 68)

States are often more concerned about “relative gains” rather than “absolute gains,” making it difficult for them to engage in cooperative processes. Even in domestic politics, collective action can be challenging in the absence of coercion and enforcement mechanisms due to issues related to “free riding.” In any case, states in a state of anarchy will be in a constant state of concern about the possibility that others might achieve greater gains through cooperation. As long as these relative gains can be later translated into military gains, the fear of relative loss compared to the gains of others may lead some to prefer non-cooperation. (Jennifer , 2002, p. 70)

Generally, realists argue that states are inherently self-interested and prioritize their own security and survival. In this view, in an anarchic international system, it becomes challenging for states to ensure their security except by relying on themselves. This self-help logic makes the international system a realm of self-reliance, which may not encourage states to engage in cooperation. Realism emphasizes that states are primarily motivated by their own national interests, and cooperation is seen as a secondary consideration.

2. Neoliberalism and the dynamics of international cooperation

Neoliberalism generally recognizes the anarchic nature of the international system and the challenges it poses to cooperation. (Jervis, 2003, p. 280) However, Robert Axelrod, Robert Keohane, and Kenneth Oye, argue that anarchy does not necessarily make cooperation between states impossible. They believe that international institutions can mitigate the effects of anarchy by reducing the costs of information gathering, enhancing the principle of reciprocity, and making punishment for deviating from norms easier to enforce. (Keohane, 1988, p. 386) While institutions may not prevent wars, they can alleviate concerns about cheating and mitigate suspicions that sometimes arise due to unequal gains resulting from cooperation, such as "free riding." Therefore, Keohane suggests that, because of anarchy, cooperation is not something that can occur automatically; it requires planning and negotiation. (Jervis, 2003, p. 280)

In the same context, Robert Jervis cautiously engages with the argument that Neorealism deny the possibility of cooperation or perceive it as weak compared to Neoliberalism; Jervis believes that the convergence between Neorealism and Neoliberalism is not the sole reason to dismiss this claim about the perspectives of both sides on cooperation. (Jervis, 2003, p. 282) This argument, which sees conflicts of interest as absolute and frames international politics within a zero-sum game, is not entirely accurate. The reality is that both Neoliberalism and even Neorealism recognize that international politics is characterized by ongoing negotiation. There is always a mixture of conflicting and shared interests, and it is not purely a zero-sum game (Jervis, 2003, p. 283)

While Neorealism view international relations as a continuous struggle for survival, gains, and dominance, Neoliberalism do not deny the existence of cases of intense conflict. However, they do not perceive this image as the complete characteristic of international politics. In many instances and in various areas, states can work together to mitigate the effects of anarchy, generate mutual gains, and avoid common harm. This is what Robert Jervis concluded when he considered that Neoliberalism is not necessarily more cooperative than Neorealism. It is more accurate to say that Neoliberalism argue that cooperation is more likely to be achieved more than Neorealism, and that conflicts are not inevitable but can be avoided. (Jervis, 2003, p. 283)

In general, Neorealism and Neoliberalism adopt different perspectives on what needs to change to increase the level of cooperation in specific situations. These differences can be better understood by applying Robert Powell's distinction between “preferences” and “strategies” or means to achieve goals. Here, Neoliberalism appear to be optimistic because they believe that if there is a change in preferences more than in strategies, this can be sufficient to achieve mutual benefit. Many of these changes can come through better information about the other party's situation, details about their actions, and their intentions for the future.

However, Neoliberalism acknowledge that anarchy can be an obstacle to state cooperation. In order to develop a theoretical understanding of why the anarchic structure of the international system impedes cooperation, Neoliberals have turned to insights from microeconomics and game theory. (Little, 2014, p. 295) Neoliberal institutionalists draw parallels between the market and the international system due to their similar anarchic structure. While the market, in its normal state, does not offer any analytical advantage to neoliberal, the logic of microeconomics becomes more useful when dealing with the concept of “Market failure.”

Market failure can occur when unrestricted competition among economic units leads to what is termed a market collapse. In this case, economists argue that an alternative mechanism is needed to generate cooperation rather than competition, and some economists call for state intervention in such situations. The state, when necessary, can intervene in the market, forcing economic actors to cooperate rather than compete. (Little, 2014, p. 296)

In the international system, there is no equivalent to the state that can compel states to cooperate. It is, therefore, not surprising that global problems have become widespread due to states' failure to cooperate. Neoliberalism see global issues like environmental pollution, resource depletion, and arms races as global dilemmas resulting from “Market failure.” On the other hand, the existence of institutions suggests that cooperation is possible even under anarchic conditions. Anarchy does not hinder cooperation; it simply makes it more challenging to achieve. (Little, 2014, p. 297) Countries can cooperate by reducing transaction costs – the costs associated with negotiating and implementing agreements. Success in reducing these costs can facilitate cooperation, and institutions can play a significant role in this regard. This can help explain why institutional cooperation continues in the absence of favorable conditions.

Despite the “Prisoner's Dilemma” suggesting that market failure occur because, in a anarchic system, there is an expectation that states will compete rather than cooperate, Neoliberalism argue that the Prisoner's Dilemma exaggerates the difficulty of cooperation in anarchic context. This is because the

Prisoner's Dilemma assumes that the game is played for only single one-shot, but Neoliberalism assert that it is more realistic to consider the game being played for multiple repeated rounds, which are likely to yield different results. If players realize that they are in subsequent rounds, the "Shadow of the Future" will influence their strategic calculations. The constraints arising from the expectation of losses in future rounds will work to deter states from defection in the future because if one state defects, all others will follow suit according to "TIT FOR TAT" principle (Little, 2014, p. 298).

As a result, the most important mechanism for cooperation is attributed to the principle of reciprocity rather than the presence of a dominant power. Therefore, Neoliberalism believes that the role of institutions, long-term interactions, and the principle of mutual punishment are all factors that help mitigate the effects of anarchy, thereby increasing the likelihood of cooperation.

3. Beyond Rationalism: a Constructivist view on the anarchy debate

Constructivism provides a valuable critique of the perspectives offered by Rationalism (Neorealism and Neoliberalism) regarding the impact of anarchy on international cooperation. From a Constructivist standpoint, Neorealism's emphasis on the structural constraints of anarchy and the self-help logic overlooks the role of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping state behavior. Constructivists argue that states' perceptions of their own interests and those of others are not solely determined by the anarchic structure but can be influenced by evolving social norms and shared understandings. This suggests that the international system is not static, and states can adapt their behaviors and preferences based on changing norms and identities, potentially fostering cooperation even within an anarchic environment (Jackson & Sorensen, 2013, p. 209).

Similarly, Constructivism challenges Neoliberalism's approach by highlighting the importance of ideational factors in shaping state behavior. While Neoliberalism acknowledges the possibility of cooperation and emphasizes the role of institutions and rational self-interest, it tends to underestimate the significance of normative change. Constructivists argue that cooperation can be driven by shared norms, identity, and cultural factors that Neoliberalism's focus on rational cost-benefit calculations may not fully account for. By offering these critiques, Constructivism contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of international cooperation, stressing that the international system is socially constructed and dynamic, allowing for the evolution of state behaviors and interests over time. (viotti & kauppi, 2010, p. 277)

Constructivism's perspective on anarchy as a historical and social construction, where "anarchy is what states make of it," (Wendt, 1992, p. 395) offers a fundamentally different view of the international system. According to this viewpoint, anarchy is not a fixed and inherent condition but is rather shaped by

states' interpretations and interactions. This means that there can be multiple logics of anarchy in the international system, each with its unique impact on how states choose to cooperate or not. This constructivist understanding suggests that the dynamics of international relations are not solely determined by the anarchic structure but are influenced by evolving norms, shared understandings, and the ways in which states perceive and respond to anarchy. As a result, the concept of anarchy becomes a more flexible and adaptable framework for analyzing international cooperation and conflict.

Generally, the constructivist analysis of cooperation focuses on how the expectations generated by behavior influence identities and interests. The process of institution-building is, in itself, a process of internalizing new understandings about self and others to acquire new identities. The role of institutions is not only to create constraints on state behavior, as rationalists argue, but more than that, the interaction game is not solely based on rational calculations to determine strategies. Interaction generates an impact on the identities of the players. The process of learning cooperation among egoists is simultaneously a rebuilding process of interests within the framework of shared commitments to social norms. (Wendt, 1992, p. 417)

Over time, this leads to transforming mutual dependence on interaction outcomes into a positive linkage of organized collective interests around standards. These standards resist change because they are tied to the actors' commitments to their identities and interests, not just due to "transaction costs" as rationalists posit. Therefore, the constructivist analysis of the "cooperation problem" is fundamentally a cognitive, not behavioral, analysis, as it is concerned with "intersubjective knowledge" that influences the structure of identities and interests. (Wendt, 1992, p. 417)

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article explored the profound impact of anarchy on international cooperation, with a specific emphasis on examining the divergent perspectives of Neorealism and Neoliberalism. Anarchy is posited as a fundamental concept shaping international politics and significantly influencing state behavior. The central inquiry centers around the feasibility of cooperation within the constraints of an anarchic system. Neorealism, exemplified by Kenneth Waltz, contends that anarchy plays a pivotal role in driving conflict due to states' perpetual quest for power within a competitive and distrustful environment. This perspective attributes not only the occurrence of wars but also the uncertainty of cooperation to international anarchy. Neoliberalism, represented by scholars like Robert Keohane, recognizes structural constraints but maintains a more optimistic outlook, asserting that institutions can mitigate adversarial effects and facilitate cooperation through reciprocity and norm enforcement. Constructivism, another

critical perspective, challenges Neorealism's structural focus by emphasizing the influence of ideas, norms, and identity in shaping state behavior, providing a dynamic understanding of the international system. The article highlights how Constructivism enriches the debate by underscoring the significance of normative change and shared norms in promoting cooperation, challenging Neoliberalism's emphasis on institutions. In summary, the article underscores anarchy's paramount role in shaping international politics. Neorealism emphasizes challenges arising from anarchy, while Neoliberalism offers optimism through institutions, and Constructivism enriches the discourse by emphasizing normative change and identity in promoting cooperation. These perspectives collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of the intricate dynamics of international cooperation within an anarchic world.

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