Realism and the Constructivist Challenge: Rejecting, Reconstructing, or Rereading

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Does realism have nothing to say about change in the actors, identities, social practices, and institutions that constitute the present or any future global order? Constructivism has given renewed impetus to this perspective on realism due to its almost universal characterization as a challenge to realism’s emphasis on structure at the expense of history. Because the reintroduction of “change” as an analytical concept into international relations (IR) theorizing proper is the constructivist goal, many constructivists believe realism is the very antithesis of constructivist theorizing. If the widely accepted claim that realism is incapable of accounting for dynamism in global politics is correct, it is hard to fathom how realism has managed to survive so long as a general theoretical category, let alone dominate the field, as its critics continue to claim.

Realists have been just as content to ignore the development of constructivism on the grounds that it is a passing fad. Yosef Lapid’s and Friedrich Kratochwil’s review of initial realist reactions to the constructivist challenge confirms a realist penchant for elaboration and revision rather than “reconstruction,” which involves “significant changes in theoretical cores without an intention . . . to sever all links with the established theoretical tradition.”

1 In this context, the term “constructivism” includes what John Gerard Ruggie has termed in Constructing the World Polity: Essays on International Institutionalization (London: Routledge 1998), pp. 35–36, the “neoclassical” (Ernst B. Haas, Friedrich Kratochwil, Nicholas Onuf, Emmanuel Adler, Martha Finnemore, Ruggie himself) and the “naturalistic” (Alexander Wendt, David Dessler) variants. It does not include what he identifies as the “postmodern” variant.

relatively superfluous debate over whether material or ideational factors matter most to international outcomes, it is striking how little cross-paradigmatic dialogue has been generated among practitioners of these two approaches. Their present relationship appears to provide a fine example of Thomas J. Biersteker’s observation that “More often than not, rather than generating sophisticated new understandings and/or synthetic new constructions, major epistemological debates have devolved into dismissals of the legitimacy of other approaches and/or mutual incomprehension.”

There is blame to dispense all around here in the refusal to seriously engage in the concerns of the other. But the point of this essay is not to blame; rather it is to highlight an essential irony. Realism and constructivism need one another to correct their own worst excesses. Without some degree of realist structuralism, constructivism is in real danger of becoming what Fred Halliday calls “presentism (everything is new)”; and without some degree of constructivist historicism, realism seems to have already fallen prey to “transhistorical complacency (nothing is new).” Reconciling the two approaches so that both stasis and change in global social order are explained simultaneously seems desirable. The problem is how to do so while remaining consistent with what scholars from both approaches consider their core assumptions. The reason why cross-paradigmatic conversations so often degenerate into what James Der Derian observes is “a dialogue of the deaf between opposing schools” may be the failure to follow R. B. J. Walker’s advice that “differences among approaches to world politics must be addressed at the level of basic ontological assumptions.”

In this regard, even the most encouraging gestures toward bridge building must confront the dilemma that a reconstruction acceptable to one approach may not be acceptable to the other. Theoretical reconciliations are difficult to accomplish because what differentiates approaches are the particular ontological givens to which they subscribe. Steve Smith succinctly puts it, different choices are made regarding “what is the world like and what is its furniture?” as well as about the relationship among that furniture. Richard Little notes that

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attempts at reconciliation too often “gloss over fundamental differences,” which “necessarily rest on judgements derived from deep-seated and ultimately untestable beliefs about reality.”

This view suggests that a theoretical collaboration between seemingly contradictory approaches like realism and constructivism can only be achieved if there is already an ontological common ground. Establishing this common ground demands comparisons that focus on their most contradictory elements and the ontological sources for those elements. It also demands adopting what Ernst B. Haas and Peter Haas refer to as a pragmatic version of theoretical tolerance, which acknowledges, accepts, and respects difference on the grounds that one’s own “social construction of reality cannot be proved superior to anyone else’s.”

This essay undertakes such a comparison, and I argue that common ontological ground is possible, depending on the tolerance exercised and ontological choices made by realists and constructivists. To reach that conclusion, we must wade into choppy theoretical waters because I believe realism’s commitment to transhistorical limitations on the human capacity to affect desirable, intended, or rational change derives from its ontological insistence that there is an ongoing causal relationship between biology and human political and social activities. Since most American social scientists tend to recoil from any discussion about biology, there are dangers in considering realist ontology so candidly.

Yet there are also advantages to derive from realism’s insistence that the transformation to human identities and social practices occurs within broadly proscribed biological boundaries that are determined before the act of social construction. This enables us to reread realism as an explanation of the process of global institutional transformation itself, but also simultaneously confirms that realism cannot serve as an explanation for the content of institutional transformation. To complete its narratives of social reality, realism must collaborate instead with an approach like constructivism, which is capable of addressing the evolution of particular social content.

Conversely, as Ted Hopf observes, because constructivism has an “open ontology,” it provides no theoretically proscribed boundaries about when to expect stasis and change in the identities and social practices that constitute any global order. In response to this obvious drawback, some constructivists have

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posited particular boundaries to what is socially constructable. Such boundaries need not approximate those defined by realists, but the open ontology of constructivists does allow them to make alternative choices about the ontological givens from which realism’s transhistoricism derives. The proposition that there may be limitations on how human beings construct their social realities opens the theoretical space necessary for a potential dialogue with realists about the subject. It may be theoretically possible to build a bridge from both sides of the river and, in so doing, correct the explanatory errors of “presentism” that are common to the constructivist literature, while reducing the transhistorical complacency of realist theorizing.

**REALIST ONTOLOGY**

Although disagreements galvanize contemporary debate within the realist approach itself, all realists ultimately appear to agree that human activity occurs within transhistorically proscribed limits and that human beings do not control or determine the range of these limits.⁷⁰ Benjamin Frankel asserts, “A key element of realism . . . is the assumption that there are significant things out there which exist independently of our thoughts and experience.”⁷¹ Debates among realists are never about whether it is legitimate to posit limitations; rather they involve where responsibility should be placed for transhistorically proscribed limits and what that means for the range of anticipated outcomes.

The ontological source for realism’s commitment to transhistorical limitations can be traced to a foundational insistence that biology plays a causal role

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in human political and social activities. This insistence is usually implicit because it occurs in a milieu that remains highly skeptical of biology’s role in social activity. Although all IR paradigms rely on contestable assumptions about human biological attributes (there is an element of biological determinism in all social theory), contemporary American theorists generally hesitate to openly state the biological case for their arguments. One reason may be the earlier and unconsidered application of biological evolutionary theory to social phenomena, which led to frightening social programs such as eugenics and Social Darwinism. Beyond normative concerns lie the obvious differences between the process of biological adaptation and the processes of human cultural adaptation, as well as the complexities and questionable validity of genetic causal aggregation. As a recent rebuke by Ann Tickner underscores, sociobiology is too often evoked as a cause masking as justification for socially constructed categories.

In this context it is also worth recalling that although neorealism’s rationalist-scientific epistemology has been the subject of severe criticism, Kenneth Waltz adopted it in part to avoid classical realism’s reliance on biologically derived human attributes to explain international outcomes. Yet the biological foundation never entirely disappeared from neorealist theorizing either. Brooks points out that “the internal coherence of the neorealist framework itself depends fundamentally on the psychological assumption that actors are characteristically highly fearful.” Such an assumption can be warranted only if it is licensed by an implicit perspective on human nature that, as Annette Freyberg-Inan documents in her comprehensive review of human nature conceptions in realist

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texts, involves universality, fixity, and pessimism.\textsuperscript{15} Thayer has recently made more explicit the connection between this realist perspective on human nature and theories of evolutionary biology, arguing that the latter “offers a firm intellectual foundation for the realist argument” itself.\textsuperscript{16}

Moreover, I argue that the very ontology to which all realist IR theory subscribes is Darwinian evolutionary biology. Realism has transplanted into a political-social context both Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the modern synthesis between Darwinism and genetics that emerged in evolutionary biology.\textsuperscript{17} A comparison of the essential elements found in the modern Darwinian synthesis and realism easily underscore this assertion.

In the study of evolutionary biology, the natural environment served as a selector of physical traits in that it forced competition over resources that then produced species variation.\textsuperscript{18} It did so by tapping into genetic variations that allowed for the exploitation of different food resources. Due to greater food exploitation, individuals with those characteristics survived longer and in better health. This allowed them a better chance to breed, thereby passing the variations onto subsequent generations. In much the same way, realists assume the existence of a zero-sum environment that generates a species-wide fear of death and intraspecies competition to avoid it. Based on this implicit biological context, realism’s overarching narrative tells what evolutionary biologists refer to as “just-so stories” about the behaviors and institutions that are anticipated in a context of ongoing competition. Realist accounts of the process of intraspecies socialization and adaptive institutional changes are dominated by this selection-by-competition logic, which remains ahistorical because it has its emulative, ontological roots in evolutionary biology.


\textsuperscript{16} Thayer, “Bringing in Darwin,” p. 125.


For many nonrealist IR scholars, the emulation of Darwinism is not only obvious, but also automatically damns realism as a theoretical enterprise. Yet the condemnation that is reserved for realism on this score may arise, at least in part, because its continued adherence to Darwinian state-of-nature analogies contrasts with what Albert Somit and Steven Peterson observe is the dominant assumption in all American social scientific theorizing: that “political behavior is learned behavior.” In other words, the assumptions about human nature that inform the American social sciences are traceable not to Darwin’s theory of natural selection and modern evolutionary biology, but to Jean-Baptiste Lamarck’s theory of “in-use inheritance.” This theory has always served as an attractive albeit scientifically suspect alternative to those who remain uncomfortable with some of the nastier implications of Darwinism. This may help explain why, despite the impossibility of formulating social theory without first making assumptions about human nature, realism has been the subject of particularly vitriolic attacks in the American “Enlightenment” context, leading Robert Gilpin to glumly observe that “no one loves a political realist.”

While many scholars will continue to find fault with realism for its obvious subscription to a Darwinian ontology, it is possible to argue that realism has not been Darwinian enough. In failing to fully consider their own ontology and its theoretical implications, realists have made some basic explanatory mistakes and missed important narrative possibilities. The problem begins in the tendency to derive realist skepticism from, as Stefano Guzzini notes, either the particular context within which politics unfolds or assumptions about unchanging biological tendencies.

On the one hand are what Michael Spirtas calls the “tragedy” realists or, alternatively, the “defensive” realists, who believe that the selection-by-competition logic is induced by the anarchic environment as an objective force separate from human beings and including access to natural resources. This logic allows for the possibility that conditional variations within the environment might mitigate the violence of competitive behavior. On the other hand

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21 Gilpin, “No One Loves a Political Realist,” in Frankel, ed., Realism.


23 Spirtas, “A House Divided.”
are the "evil" realists or, alternatively, the "offensive" realists, who believe that the selection-by-competition logic is derived from the biological attributes of power lust or aggression. This has the effect of producing extreme conflicts of interest and security-seeking behaviors that cannot be mitigated by environmental variation. In attributing causality, realists tend to choose between the zero-sum environment and a particular individual characteristic that mirrors that environment. Therefore they disagree over what outcomes to expect, even as they agree that the world is comprised of competing survival seekers.

In the context of evolutionary biology's theoretical framework, offensive realists may be on firmer ground. Modern evolutionary biology is the synthesis of Darwin's natural selection theory with the study of genetics, and neither can explain effectively without the other. The impact of the zero-sum resource environment, which favored the variations of some individuals over others for survival and breeding, is the first step in the evolutionary adaptive process. The second step is the inheritance of those variations from one generation to the next. Genetic inheritance then preserves the variation in subsequent generations, while simultaneously acting as the resource pool from which characteristic variations may be drawn if environmental circumstances change. It is the combination of natural selection and modern genetics that ultimately allows Darwinism to account for the simultaneous possibility of stasis and change in species characteristics, as well as their tremendous variation. If an evolutionary biological ontology is going to serve as the basis for constructing explanations for stasis and change in human social practices, these two causal forces must be considered to work in tandem rather than in opposition.

It is no surprise that when defensive realists have attempted to specify behavioral patterns solely on the basis of a zero-sum environment, they have run into criticism from both nonrealists and realists. No evolutionary biologist expects to predict behavioral characteristics on such a basis since the fact of competition does not indicate the specific characteristics that might be selected for the purposes of food exploitation. Why did birds develop wings and human beings thumbs when both species were survival seekers in competition with one another? Knowledge that a zero-sum environment operates according to a selection-by-competition logic tells us nothing specific about how a species will survive behaviorally and genetically. It merely tells us that because survival is at stake, alternatives will be selected and subsequent adaptations will become genetically path-dependent. Even with greater environmental specificity, it would still be impossible to know a priori which traits would be selected and what behaviors to anticipate in a zero-sum environment since species variation exists in every ecosystem.

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24 Ibid.
Offensive realists do not escape entirely unscathed from a fuller consideration of realism’s Darwinian ontology either. If explanation is going to revolve around a particular characteristic that then produces path-dependent behavioral tendencies, the choice of characteristics must be rooted in the competition-by-selection logic that is induced by the environment itself. It must be derived from what made human beings unique from other species in their evolutionary past, not what makes them unique from one another now or since the self-recording of historical human time. Anything short of this distinction threatens to reify a socially constructed difference created by human beings themselves.

While seeking power or aggression may be observable intraspecies characteristics, it is not clear that these are the most distinguishing characteristics of the human species. Why not the human capacity for love, cooperation, self-sacrifice, empathy, intelligence, or language? Since characteristic selection is based on the exploitation of alternative food sources to survive and breed, what differentiates human beings from other species has to be associated with collecting food, procreating, and child rearing.

From this perspective, it is group formation in connection with the extended gestation of the human infant that stands out as one of the more distinguishing characteristics of the species. William Bloom points out that the family is the smallest human grouping, yet given the gestation needs of human infants, it is essential for human survival. Individual adult humans would also survive longer on aggregate within groups than not, thereby affording a chance to reproduce and reinforcing a species-wide tendency to form groups in the process. In addition, Daniel Druckman observes that groups not only provide human beings “and their progeny with security and safety as well as status and prestige in return for their loyalty and commitment,” but also serve “the individual’s need for self-protection and self-transcendence.” While the human body cannot survive indefinitely, the individual’s identification with a group and its social practices can make even death psychologically manageable and perhaps appear physically transcendable.

It is possible to posit that a tendency toward group formation was a human biological characteristic selected by the zero-sum natural environment, which


26 Daniel Druckman, “Nationalism, Patriotism, and Group Loyalty: A Social Psychological Perspective,” Mershon International Studies Review 38 (1994), pp. 44–45. The proposition that human beings are biologically predisposed to form groups remains a highly contentious and complex one, even among evolutionary biologists and sociobiologists. See, for example, citations provided by Druckman, the collection of essays in Sober, ed., Conceptual Issues, the citations provided by Mercer, “Anarchy and Identity,” and John Duckitt et al., “Minimal Intergroup Bias and Real-World Prejudice,” Politics, Groups, and the Individual 8, Nos. 1–2 (1999).
sequently channeled the selection of other human characteristics and behavioral tendencies. And, in relation to realism, it is noteworthy that the concept of groups has always occupied a venerable place in the realist narrative tradition. Randall Schweller and David Priess list as the first core assumption of the realist paradigm, even before the assumption of anarchy, that “humans do not face one another primarily as individuals but as members of groups that command their loyalty.” In so doing, they provide numerous supporting citations underscoring the fact that it is the existence of the behavioral patterns of any group, not simply the nation-state, which remains realism’s primary unit of analysis.

This interest in groups derives from the Darwinian ontology and selection-by-competition logic to which realism subscribes. Yet beyond the work of Gilpin and the more recent “neoclassical” realists, the implications of group formation for transhistorical human behavioral patterns and the evolution of global social practices has received little attention in the realist literature. The reason may be that while a tendency to form groups results from natural selection pressures, it is not a simple approximation of those competitive pressures into individual human behavior. Thayer notes in citing Wilson that “group selection is the component of natural selection that operates on the differential productivity of local populations within a global population.” As such, it affects the dynamics of identification and therefore how human beings construct the social practices that bind individuals into groups. Yet these ramifications are more complex than those derived from characteristics like power lust or aggression, upon which traditional realist narratives rely.


28 The term “neoclassical realism” was coined by Gideon Rose in “Neoclassical Realism” in 1998 to describe realist scholars who are interested in how systemic variables are filtered through the domestic and individual levels to produce outcomes; see also Schweller, “The Progressive Nature.” Realists who fall under this category combine elements of both defensive and offensive realism, concurring with the former that environmental variations produce outcomes more varied than aggression and with the latter that human nature plays an explicit causal role in outcomes. The biological attributes are more varied than power lust and include in-group/out-group distinctions (Mercer, “Anarchy and Identity,” and Schweller and Priess, “A Tale of Two Realisms”); emotions and perceptions (Jonathan Mercer, “Emotion Adds Life),” presented at the International Studies Association annual meeting, February 18–21, 1999, Washington, D.C.; William C. Wohlforth, “Realism and the End of the Cold War,” International Security 19 [1994/95], pp. 91–129); and risk-aversion (Taliaferro; “Security-Seeking under Anarchy,” and “Power Politics and the Balance of Risk: Why Do Great Powers Fight Peripheral Wars,” manuscript in progress). Other neoclassical realists are less interested in the biological parameters that affect foreign policymaking and more interested in domestic institutions (for example, the work of Jack Snyder, Fareed Zakaria, Thomas Christensen, and Aaron Friedberg).

The implications of group formation for social construction not only significantly broaden the realist narrative space, but also pave the way for a potential dialogue with constructivists about whether and what limits exist on the construction of human social activity. It may be impossible to entirely avoid biological determinism and still “do” realism, but that determinism at least can be put into a context where it serves not as a predictor of specific behavior but as a broad parameter for expectations about the socially possible. Doing so requires rereading realism so that it focuses on the implications of group formation for human social practices and institutions. This does not mean that characteristics such as intelligence, empathy, or the capacity for language are unessential to human development and social construction. Rather these (and other) characteristics are placed into a specific context involving group formation as an ontological parameter for how human beings construct their social realities.

Acknowledging this parameter allows realism to anticipate transhistorical patterns to the construction of global human social practices. These patterns are as much about change as they are about stasis, and it is realism’s reliance on a Darwinian ontology that allows it to combine both change and history, as well as stasis and structure, under the same narrative and theoretical umbrella. Much confusion remains on this score because, as with Darwinism, realism frequently has been misread by both practitioners and critics as a theory capable of predicting only stasis and similarity.

Such misreadings of the modern Darwinian synthesis are certainly odd because it is a theory of “dynamic equilibrium” in its capacity to simultaneously account for biological stasis and change, as well as similarity and difference. The fault may lie in failing to recognize that Darwinism is a theory about the process of biological evolution itself and not the evolution and genetic composition of any specific organism. In other words, Darwinism does not involve specifying which characteristics result for any particular species within any given environment, but rather the reason why species variations occur in the first place. Darwinism accounts for the process by which adaptations were selected for all species, and it expects subsequent evolution to be path-dependent because, as Peter Bowler notes, “evolution can only work by modifying the structures available to it.” 30

In much the same way, realism may be reread as anticipating a transhistorical process for the development of social practices, and so it may serve as a narrative of dynamic equilibrium for the fact of social construction itself. While a more careful consideration of its own Darwinian ontology may open narrative possibilities for realism, it also means accepting its explanatory limitations. Chief among them is that such an ontology does not allow realism to predict or

30 Bowler, Evolution, p. 182.
anticipate the development or selection of any particular social practice, only
the transhistorical process by which human social practices evolve in general.
The same transhistorical process anticipated by this realist rereading also con-
firms that the specific forms of social practices and institutions are necessarily
path-dependent and historically situated, which is the point of constructivism.
To understand why the content of social practice develops as it does, realism
needs constructivist historicism to complete its narratives of social reality. How
this may be the case is the subject of the next section.

REREADING REALISM

Borrowing from Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon the concept of “unowned
processes,” in which social practices evolve but have no identifiable authors, I
treat group formation here as a species-wide response to pressures that emanate
from the natural environment and that have no identifiable author.31 As such, it
is an unowned process that remains biologically constitutive before the human
being is socially constructed. This is the process that biology brings to the
social table; it motivates human social interaction itself; and it prescribes the
boundaries within which human social practices will change, endure, converge,
or differ. In so doing, it produces discernable patterns in the relationship between
human beings and the social practices they create.

One obvious implication is that the in-group and out-group distinction should
be considered a constitutive element of individual identity formation. This means
that members of groups will be primed to see the members of other groups as
competitors. It produces the well-documented phenomenon in the social iden-
tity theory literature that “no matter how trivial or ad hoc the groupings, and in
the apparent absence of any competing values, the mere perception of another
group leads to in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination.”32 The act of
discrimination based on group membership is not learned behavior according
to this realist rereading, but rather results from the unowned process of group
formation that operates ontologically before both social interaction and the
specific practices human beings create. That is, because social practices and
institutions are developed and propagated within a context of group competi-
tion, group discrimination is a basic parameter for social reality.

31 Patrick Thaddeus Jackson and Daniel H. Nexon, “Relations before States: Sub-
stance, Process, and the Study of World Politics,” European Journal of International
Relations 5, No. 3 (1999).
32 Mercer, “Anarchy and Identity,” p. 238. See, in addition, Bloom, Personal Iden-
tity; Druckman, “Nationalism”; and Robert A. Hinde, “Aggression and War: Indivi-
duals, Groups, and States,” in Philip E. Tetlock et al., eds., Behavior, Society, and
This also produces differences in the qualitative nature of intragroup and intergroup social practices. Yale Ferguson and Richard Mansbach are correct that "at any given moment, there exist numerous actual and potential political forms that attract and sometimes compete for human loyalties." Yet Ferguson and Mansbach’s own review of historical regional “polities” reveals that a particular form usually emerges with the authoritative ability to subsume other polities to mobilize and allocate resources. How such dominant polities attract and compete for loyalty is informed by a selection-by-competition logic. Social practices and institutions that encourage altruism to and cooperation within the group are common to intragroup interaction because these strengthen group identification and cohesion relative to other groupings. Alternatively, social practices and institutions that support competition characterize intergroup interaction because these allow each group to extract resources necessary for its own continued existence.

This does not mean that negative comparisons or intergroup competition must necessarily involve violence, since variance in access to natural resources and intergroup exposure also affect how much violence is a necessary component of group competition. Nor does it exclude the possibility that particular types of social practices might act as mitigating circumstances for intergroup violence. Yet neither possibility obviates the selection-by-competition logic operating across groups. Even when groups have social practices in common, such as capitalism, democratic governance, religious beliefs, or language, these institutions are still operating within a context of group competition. The tendency toward out-group discrimination remains, not only because it is biologically engendered according to this rereading, but also because each group relies upon these social practices to extract resources for itself. As a result, intergroup social practices reify intragroup differences and effectively maintain each group as distinct from other groupings.

Rereading realism’s selection-by-competition logic in this way also provides identifiable limits on how much collective identity transformation willingly occurs. In the absence of violent imposition, the potential for group death would have to be at stake before individual members could be subsumed psychologically into larger collectives. Realists have always relied on this basic


34 The reformulation of neorealism suggested by Barry Buzan, Charles Jones, and Richard Little in The Logic of Anarchy: Neorealism to Structural Realism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) is correct to identify intergroup exposure as relevant to systemic socialization. Yet in promoting interaction capacity as a systemic variable, their reformulation ultimately loses sight of the group competition context that remains. See also Guzzini’s critique, Realism, pp. 217–226.
logic to explain why balances of power form, in that competitive groups are willing to pool their resources to fight a common enemy.\textsuperscript{35} A realism that acknowledges groups as an essential parameter of human social activity also explains why these alliances prove to be temporary rather than stepping-stones for expanded collectives. Once the perception of a common threat passes, so too does the psychological, cognitive window of opportunity to move beyond the parameters of preexisting group identities.

Such a formulation acknowledges that the bases of group differentiation are socially constructed and can involve shared ethnicity, religion, language, political regime, or territory. But before the possibility of embracing a "more perfect union" becomes psychologically available, individual members must believe that whatever constitutes their group identity is threatened by the finality of extinction and is saved only through integration with other groupings. The mere sharing of functional interests, such as capitalist profit or the prevention of environmental pollution, lacks the capacity to resonate in this regard, though these might serve as the socially constructed basis for a group's identity (and therefore a cognitive motivation for collective expansion when these interests are perceived to be threatened by extinction).

More significant to the social construction process is that if there is an unowned process of group formation promoted by natural selection pressures, then human social activity is not an end in itself but a means to the particular ends of species survival and reproduction. This contradicts the very act of constructing social institutions because the development of processes that bind individuals into collectives is essential for both individual and group reproduction and survival. Since neither the natural environment nor the inherent tendency to form groups specifies which social practices will best obtain these ends, any particular social practices or institutions are not absolutely essential to these ends. A contradictory preference develops within groups to preserve group social practices and simultaneously modify those same practices.

To put this another way, it is precisely because individual identification with the group and its social practices is so essential to species reproduction and survival that these practices highly resist revision or modification. The preference for stasis in group social practices is produced by a combination of their constitutive role in identity, cognitive beliefs in their efficacy, functional investments made by individual members, and linkages across collective institutions. Yet there is a concurrent and paradoxical preference to modify group institutions because social practices are the only means to species reproduction and survival. Because a zero-sum anarchic environment does not indicate which particular social practices will best obtain these ends, experimentation and variety in human social practices can be anticipated since adaptive social practices

\textsuperscript{35} See Schweller and Priess, "A Tale of Two Realisms."
allow for the exploitation of variety in natural resources and address changing environmental circumstances. In the construction of group social practices there is what James March and Johan Olsen call "a bias for change" or what Daniel Dennett refers to as a preference for "keeping options open, of design revision."  

According to this rereading of realism, the dichotomies of stasis and change or structure and history are built into the very act of social construction itself. It is also a dichotomy that operates across and encompasses both the inter- and intragroup or domestic and international divide common to the neorealist literature. Because human groupings generally did not develop in complete isolation from one another, the preference for both institutional preservation and modification affects and is affected by intergroup interaction as much as intragroup interaction. There is no separate logic here for the internal and external realms, but rather a single logic involving the interaction of what is unique to a particular group with what is shared across groups. It is not what is either internal or external to a group that produces patterns to the evolution of human social activities, but rather the interaction of what is both endogenous and exogenous to a group and any series of groups.

What are some of the patterns to the historical process of social construction that this realist rereading anticipates? First among them is the prevalence of imitation. Competition over resources coupled with observation of how other human groupings maintained themselves has an impact on whether groups seek to preserve or modify their own social practices. Although internal innovation certainly is an important source for institutional change, João Resende-Santos points out that because "in anarchic, self-help realms the critical test is effectiveness," groups remain "averse to basing their security on contriving new organizations or technology, or relying on un-tested and unproven ones." The preferred sources of institutional innovation are the social practices of other groups that have been "tested." A context of group competition continuously raises questions about the efficacy of institutional preservation or modification, yet it simultaneously provides only comparative answers. The social practices


of other groups become the primary ideational resource pool for alternative methods to obtaining group goals.

Although the presence of other groups serves as a universal prompter for emulation, not all groups necessarily emulate or do so in quite the same way because particular social practices and institutions unique to each group already exist. That is, if social practice is fundamental to group constitution and differentiation, groups cannot encounter one another as socially clean slates. The external is always filtered through existing social practices, some of which by their very nature may predispose groups to either the preservation or modification of their social practices. Whether any particular group will be motivated to maintain or modify its social practices ultimately depends on what is socially endogenous to that group, even as the selection-by-competition logic is operating dynamically to spread common social practices across groups. What triggers either institutional preservation or experimentation (as well as the qualitative content of the latter) depends on a simultaneous combination of what is socially external and internal to groups.

A second pattern to constructing social reality, which this realist rereading would anticipate, is the tendency to emulate the social practices of the powerful since power is a shorthand means to differentiate among groups based on their greater capacity to exploit resources on behalf of their members. It is hardly surprising that in emulating one another’s military technology, “It is the victorious military system of every great war that sets the standard by which all others measure themselves and which acts as the model imitated by all.”

A crude measure to be sure, but a pattern that may be anticipated in a context of groups all groping to find the social means to survive competitive contact with one another. Nor are military practices the only types of institutions that are imitated, since these are intertwined with political, economic, religious, and cultural institutions, to name only a few of the more obvious.

Polarity also affects the variety of potential institutions that would serve as attractive objects for emulation. In this way, the powerful groups, in their numbers and the qualitative content of their social practices, set the stage for the evolving historical construction of global social reality. They do so not simply because they may physically determine outcomes, but also because their social practices become the primary objects of transgroup imitation. Thus power differentials among groups are a major source for the spread of common practices and institutions across groups.

A third pattern anticipated by this realist rereading also allows it to avoid functionally efficient institutional teleology. Practices are selected for emulation on a subjective basis that involves what group members believe allowed the powerful to maximally exploit resources for their own benefit. Selection

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38 Resende-Santos, “Anarchy,” p. 211.
issues from and filters through existing group social practices. Choosing whether and what to imitate derives from existing group social practices and can never be known or assessed in their absence. As Patrick Jackson and Daniel Nexon observe, “These processes of intersubjective transformation are themselves causal, and do not function merely as ‘intervening variables’ to transmit the effects of external shocks to some renewed functional integration of the system.” 39 All choices of emulation are situated historically instead and can be understood only within the institutional contexts that authorized them. Whether the institutions that are selected for imitation are actually responsible for having allowed the powerful to efficiently exploit resources is irrelevant to this choice. What matters instead is the social context of the emulators that determines whether, what, and how to emulate.

Whatever practices are emulated also will be layered on top of and integrated into existing group social practices. The result is a pattern of evolving path-dependent social institutions. The practices of the powerful are the subject of transgroup emulation, but the common qualitative features of these practices are modified by institutional differences internal to each emulator. This is a simultaneous rather than chronological phenomenon, because even as groups choose to emulate, they also seek to preserve their own institutions and so will meld the emulated practices to existing institutions. The result is that groups then look similar but not identical, because each act of imitation produces a unique blend of what is exogenous to all groups with what is endogenous to each particular group.

It is here that a pool of new institutional variations emerges as a resource for subsequent transgroup emulation. The rise and fall of great powers is also as much attributable to the dual tendency for institutional preservation or modification as it is to measurable military capability. The willingness to modify social structures, thereby melding emulated ideas with existing institutions, may allow previously powerless groups to amass resources in ways that those whom they had imitated could never have imagined. As relative power increases, these institutional variations become the stuff of transgroup emulation but are never replicated identically. This then produces more institutional variation from which subsequent rounds of transgroup imitative social material will be drawn.

This same dynamic also accounts for the reverse phenomenon—why previously powerful groups decline and why particular institutions and practices fall out of emulative fashion. Gilpin points out that because “past success itself

can become an obstacle to further innovation,” the desire to preserve existing institutions is strongest among the powerful, who are less open to emulation and the revision of design space as a result. In a context of competing groups, this lack of institutional dynamism has repercussions for relative power, and as the powerful decline, so too does the transgroup tendency to imitate their institutions.

The evolutionary patterns to global social reality, which have been briefly summarized here, can be derived from realism’s selection-by-competition logic and the Darwinian ontology to which it subscribes. Yet note that none of these patterns involves specifying the precise content of global social reality. Considering its Darwinian ontology more fully allows realism to identify some boundaries within which it expects global social change and adaptation to occur, but it also indicates that institutional change is necessarily path-dependent and historically situated. The result is critical blanks in the realist narrative of social reality, and these can only be filled with an approach such as constructivism. Whether there is common ontological ground within constructivism to do so is the other half of the story.

**Constructivist Ontology**

Immediately striking in this comparative context is that as a collective, constructivists have not shied away from raising the issue of human biology in their own work. Nicholas Onuf frequently discusses the relationship between biology and social constructivism, arguing that the latter finds “socially made content dominant in and for the individual without denying the independent, ‘natural’ reality of individuals as materially situated biological beings.” Rodney Hall references “the literature on developmental psychology” to support his argument that there is a “will-to-manifest-identity,” which is a “fundamental, even primordial, motive (or ‘interest’) of self-preservation.” Wendt’s definition of the corporate identity contains an implicit biological link because it “refers to the intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute actor individuality. For human beings, this means the body and experience of consciousness.” Ferguson and Mansbach also suggest a possible biological basis for

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40 Gilpin, “Economic Evolution,” p. 413.
42 Hall, National Collective Identity, pp. 36, 38.
the development of loyalties to and identifications with particular polities, arguing that human beings “expect benefit(s) in exchange, including the psychological satisfaction of group identity and ideology.”

These references to biology and the human body are themselves a natural consequence of constructivist propositions since, as Hopf points out, “understanding how identities are constructed, what norms and practices accompany their reproduction, and how they construct each other is a major part of the constructivist research program.” For constructivists like Emmanuel Adler, that consideration involves the opportunity to “seize the middle ground” and understand “how the material, subjective and intersubjective worlds interact in the social construction of reality.” Paul Kowert echoes this possibility by noting that the “practical linguistic rules” from which “social meaning, institutions and structures” are constructed, “are all instances of behavior as well as social acts,” and as such “they occur at the nexus of biology, psychology, and sociology.” Based on these observations, constructivism appears to provide the ontological space necessary for a dialogue with realists about the boundaries that biology might place on social construction and perhaps a bridge to this realist rereading in particular.

Yet many applications of constructivism remain firmly committed to a perspective that biology is and should remain completely irrelevant to theorizing about human social activity. Thus the constructivist literature does not stray far from a Lamarckian position that human biological evolution occurred largely through in-use inheritance, which then essentially freed human biological evolution from the pressures of natural selection. It also placed human biological evolution squarely in the hands of the species itself. Ontologically, it means that there are no biological limitations on human social behavior, only limitations that have been learned and can be unlearned with human effort.

Onuf’s ontological choices illustrate this Lamarckian perspective. Onuf does struggle with the decision, recognizing that “The structuralists may be right in that the beginning must be some version of the word, some innate property of mind which orients cognition and relates to culture through language compe-

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Social Theory of International Politics (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 131–134, where he repeats this basic formulation.

44 Ferguson and Mansbach, Polities, p. 35; see also p. 382.


tence and use.” Still, Onuf regards it as “an unrealizable wish to begin with a philosophical grounding for constructivism, as a matter of social theory, which is prior to, or outside of, the constitution of history and society.” He chooses instead to “offer a constructivism with a false beginning: In the beginning was the deed,” and by this he means:

Human beings, with whatever equipment nature and/or society provides, construct society, and society is indispensable to the actualization of whatever human beings may “naturally” be; society constructs human beings out of the raw materials of nature, whether inner nature or, less problematically, the outer nature of their material circumstances. 48

Thus, “whether nature presupposes us to reason as we do, reasoning itself is a social matter” and “‘ancestral institutions,’ and not logic or genes, make modes of reasoning what they are.” 49

Along similar lines, Wendt insists that “social life is ‘ideas all the way down’ (until you get to biology and natural resources).” 50 Jeffrey Checkel notes the common distinction in the constructivist literature “that material structures, beyond certain biological necessities, are given meaning only by the social context through which they are interpreted.” 51 Onuf defends this ontological choice to start with the “social/deed” rather than the “biological/word” by arguing that “we must start in the middle, so to speak, because people and society, always having made each other, are already there and just about to change.” 52 David Dessler echoes this choice in quoting from Bhaskar “that ‘all [social] activity presupposes the prior existence of social forms,’ ” and that “‘society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all.’ ” 53

This means that there is no relationship and hence no “middle ground” between the biological and the social in most constructivist narratives. Human interaction is instead treated as if it springs forth from some unknown source that has no implications for species-wide behavior and can have no relevance to the exploration of social phenomena. The biological is considered to be merely

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48 Onuf, World of Our Making, p. 46.
49 Ibid., pp. 100, 96.
"the raw materials that nature provides" and from which "we make the world what it is."\textsuperscript{54}

Because the biological is by definition indistinguishable from the social, it does not matter whether the raw material at hand consists of a bundle of particular and complex physiological processes; it matters only that we as a species have made a human being out of it. Whatever human biology may be, in most constructivist narratives, it serves merely as an arena of unrealized, \textit{limitless} opportunity for social activity.

As a result, constructivism has the ontological potential to engage in a dialogue with realists about a "middle ground" between the biological/word and the social/deed, but the decision by many constructivists to simply ignore the biological/word has foreclosed any such discussion and the bridge building it might support. It reifies a traditional American social scientific approach to the study of social practice and institutions, and it has negative consequences for constructivism's ability to explain transformation.

\textbf{Ontological Choices and the Differences They Can Make}

What is the problem with the ontological choice to start with the social/deed? Because, according to Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil, "the constructivist research program identifies institutions as both elements of stability and as strategic variables for the analysis of change," it must "blend conjunctive analysis with an understanding of rule-governed activity and the various processes by which institutions are \textit{continually reproduced and modified} through the actors' practices."\textsuperscript{55} As Checkel describes the problem that arises from this concept of codetermination, "The devil is in the details."\textsuperscript{56} When the discussion turns to particular social practices and institutions, it seems impossible to avoid making choices about which institutions are being reproduced and which modified at any given moment in time.

In making these choices, the constructivist lacks theoretically proscribed guidelines for when to anticipate stasis or change in human social activity and institutions. The ontological choice to treat the human-social in causal isolation from the human-biological means that the only causal mechanism for either stasis or change in human social activity is human social activity. Yet this can-

\textsuperscript{54}Onuf, "Constructivism," p. 59; emphasis in original.


\textsuperscript{56}Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn," p. 346.
not be a limitation in itself since there are presumptively no biological boundaries to the social practices we can imagine and therefore to what we can construct socially. In the absence of recognized boundaries on the imagination, there is no reason to anticipate any stasis or isomorphism to human social practices. Jackson and Nexon note that contrary to the challenge facing realism, “the challenge” for constructivism becomes “to account for stability rather than change.”  

Because there is no ontological “furniture” to sit on regarding this point, many constructivists have resorted to questionable explanatory tactics to say something systematic about transformation in global social practices. Several commentators have observed, for example, that the difficulties of operationalizing the concept of codetermination have led to a reliance on sequential causal ordering and the bracketing of either agents or structures. Another favored solution to the “change problematic” has been “to utilize a ‘punctuated equilibrium’ model,” in which “change in units occurs suddenly through the ‘kick’ of ‘exogenous change’ which leads to a ‘flurry of radically new forms.’” As Steven Weber points out, “This kind of radical indeterminism” has the peculiar effect of marginalizing history by making it “singular stories of pure chance [which] can be interesting as description, but not really as part of generalizable explanations.” To avoid this indeterminism, many constructivists have relied on the equally suspect proposition that actors seek to obtain pre-given collective interests in the most institutionally efficient manner possible.

The pervasiveness of these explanatory errors in the constructivist literature is traceable to the ontological privileging of the social/deed to the exclusion of both the biological/word and (it seems) the very idea limiting social construction itself. This precludes any philosophically shared parameters for the process of stasis within the constructivist research program. In other words, since biology and materialism have no independent causal role in social reality, it can be only other social practices that affect the stability or transformation of social practices. This produces the essential problem that Onuf describes as, “If noth-

57 Jackson and Nexon, “Relations before States,” p. 314.
58 See ibid., p. 295; Checkel, “The Constructivist Turn,” p. 335.
59 Jackson and Nexon, “Relations before States,” p. 298.
ing is innate, then everything is precarious." 62 Consequently, there is a tendency to produce accounts of stasis and change that read as little more than idiosyncratically determined (and certainly by no means value-free) observations about history.

**IN SEARCH OF BOUNDARIES: REREADING CONSTRUCTIVISM**

Yet while the ontological privileging of the social/deed over the biological/word remains a popular choice in the constructivist literature. Dessler notes that “The ontology of a discourse constrains but does not determine correct explanations in that discourse.” 63 In this case, constructivism’s open ontology allows for alternative choices. Indeed, there are already some constructivists who appear dissatisfied with the failure to recognize boundaries on the socially possible.

In seeking to balance tendencies toward presentism, for example, Kratochwil notes that there seems to be an implicit belief in much of the constructivist literature “that since something is the work of imagination, anything is possible, because anything seems to be imaginable,” but that “such an argument fails to account in a systematic fashion for the constitutive nature of our sentiments in these constructions.” 64 Kratochwil argues that to leave unanalyzed feelings such as sympathy, approbation, solidarity, and hate is “to fail in the very effort of providing a coherent account of social reality.” 65 Whether he intends these sentiments to be analyzed as anything other than social constructs is unclear, but his plea to recognize parameters for the act of social construction is obvious.

Kratochwil is not alone in raising the issue of boundaries on social construction and potentially opens the door to a dialogue with realists about whether the biological/word might play a role in establishing those boundaries. Kowert observes, for example, that “for language to function, there must be categories. But it is up to agents to determine which categories.” 66 On this basis, Kowert argues that while any particular in-group/out-group distinction is always socially constructed, it may be “fundamental” for human beings to categorize one another. Categorization clearly acts as a boundary to social construction in his argument, and if it is “fundamental,” then perhaps it is biological. In fact, some constructivists recognize boundaries that are distinctly biological. This recog-

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65 Ibid., p. 197.
nition suggests that an equally legitimate ontological choice for constructivists is to consider what biological, cognitive, or physiological equipment human beings might bring to the social table, even if that equipment is utilized in a variety of social ways thereafter.

Hall's "will-to-manifest-identity," for example, is based on Bloom's work, which unambiguously traces the dynamic source for such a will to the "lengthy and vulnerable infancy and childhood" of the human species and the "biologically based drive to survival." 67 Hall uses the concept as a parameter for social construction, arguing that because hazards that threaten collective identity also threaten individual identity, "Individuals perceive that their interest lies squarely in the defense and promotion of this collective identity." 68 Biology also plays an explicit role in Daniel Deudney's account of how nationalism "artfully conflates associations arising from biological necessity with those created by historical convention." 69 The necessity to which he refers is "geopiety," or the "centrality of physical place in identity," because "the experience of and feeling of connectedness to a particular place or area" lays as great a claim on identity as ethnicity or political regime.

Each of the constructivist narratives suggests in the context of this comparison that choices about limitation are made and sometimes those choices involve the biological. The authors undoubtedly concur with Adler that, unlike the physical world, "in the social world . . . deterministic laws are improbable" and "even our most enduring institutions are based on collective understandings." 70 Each of them also has made a choice that a priori bounds their narrative expectations about the social. In so doing, they avoid "presentism" and tell internally consistent "just-so stories" about both stasis and change in human social activity.

Reread in this way, it seems that constructivism does provide the ontological space for acknowledging not only limits on the socially possible, but also the role that biology in particular might play as a limitation. The potential emerges from the constructivist side of the river as well for, at the very least, a dispassionate discussion and, at most, a collaboration with realism. This involves rejecting a strictly either-or perspective on the biological and the social in favor of one that recognizes the interrelationship between them as historically pertinent to both the biological composition of human beings and the production of human social reality. Constructivists and realists need not agree on how the

67 Bloom, Personal Identity, pp. 33, 34.
68 Hall, National Collective Identity, p. 38.
70 Adler, "Seizing the Middle Ground," pp. 329, 322.
relationship works in practice, but discussion does need to be based on a shared acknowledgment that the relationship is a pertinent one to begin with.

This acknowledgment was informed the study of evolutionary biology and human psychology for some time. Thayer points out that “the nature/nurture conflict is now commonly seen as a false dichotomy” in the field of biology, and that the “interaction principle” of genotype and environment is widely accepted instead.71 Neta Crawford makes a similar point in her examination of the dominant approaches to the study of emotion, which suggest that “no one theoretical approach will likely be able to account for the complex relationships between experience, perception, cognition, culture, and biology.”72 Crawford notes, for example, that we may be biologically biased to perceive a threat because it increases the likelihood of survival. Yet this alone cannot tell us what will be perceived as threatening in a social context since social threat is necessarily a social construct and must also be processed cognitively.

If we are to fully grasp why and how social reality is produced as it is, it is necessary to consider the interrelation of the biological, cognitive, and social rather than—as many American social scientists are prone to do—reject the biological out of hand as inappropriate to the study of the social. In this regard, the social science community is already well behind some of the scientific disciplines that historically it so avidly has sought to emulate.

Of course, acknowledging and confronting the potential for common ontological ground between realism and constructivism also means accepting the limitations that choice necessarily places on our theoretical narratives. Onuf recognizes such a limitation in conceding that to hold “an agnostic view” of biology’s relationship to the social “is to accept that constructivism limits what one can profess to know about such matters.”73 Thus he offers a “bounded, not grounded” form of constructivism. Similarly, a fuller consideration of realism’s Darwinian ontology allows realism to be grounded but alternatively bounded, and so opens some narrative doors while closing others. In recognizing this limitation, realism may build its half of a bridge to constructivism and recapture its ability to engage history as a drama that cannot be foretold. In traversing that same bridge, constructivists may regain the structural boundaries that their own ontological concern with agency and structure requires.

73 Onuf, World Of Our Making, p. 46.