JIHAD FOR JERUSALEM

Identity and Strategy in International Relations

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Jihad for Jerusalem

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*Identity and Strategy in
International Relations*

M. A. MUQTEDAR KHAN

PRAEGER

(∞)™

For my Mother, Afzalunnisa Begum.
Her love and dedication to her children is incomparable.
Her support and her prayers have been crucial
to all my endeavors.

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Preface

> Knowledge is like sealed treasure houses, the keys to them is inquiry. Inquire therefore, for therein lies reward for four: the inquirer, the learned, the auditor and their admirer.
>
> Prophet Muhammad, as reported by Al Ghazali in *Ibya-Uloom-udin*

This book began as a journey to discover the truths that underpin the constitution of society and the rules that shape the behavior of collective actors on the world stage; with a view to developing a new paradigm for understanding world politics without neglecting identity, culture, religion, and all things normative.

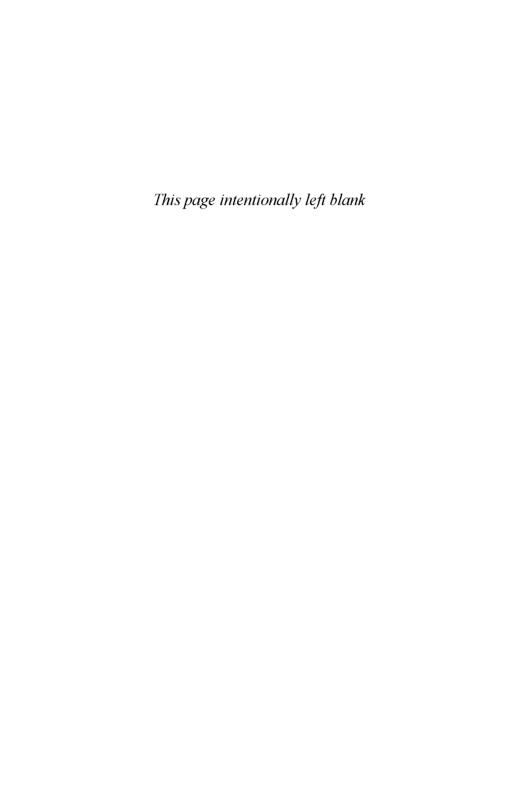But as is true of all books that themselves are transformative agents, writing this book became an exercise in writing myself. In writing this book I understood the tension between reason and culture, between rationality and identity. I discovered that epistemology is not independent of ontology. Our being is so inseparably enmeshed with what we know that *being is in knowing.* In trying to address the agent-structure problem as a necessary precondition to theory development, I realized how difficult it was to separate the self from society. In trying to learn about society, one inevitably learns so much about the self. The process by which we construct the self or the society is one and the same.

One important discovery that I made while writing this book was to fully understand the powerful opportunities that the constructivist approach provides by implicating identity with epistemology. I realized that constructivism is the methodology for which Muslim social scientists have been searching for the past four decades. Constructivist approaches (as

understood in the IR discipline) recognize the essential role of identity and normative/cultural values in the constitution of society, the individual subject, and in the decision processes that shape interactions. Agents, it recognizes, can be functionally identical but can vary normatively, and this variance has political and normative significance.

In their determination to construct a rational world, rational choice theorists, especially those who develop theories of international relations, privileged the imaginary rational agent over the real, tried to pass off normative theories as empirical, and tried to divest the human agent—in her individual as well as collective avatars—of culture, faith, and self-images. Most important, they imagined a false disjuncture between individual and society. This book seeks to break through this imaginary construct of a rational agent and her rational world to reveal the cultural, moral, spiritual, and human dimensions of human agency that, along with her rational faculty, make it so multifaceted.

The events that led to and followed the tragic attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001, have exposed the importance of identity in the political realm. Post–September 11 world politics has shown that fear and faith are both strong motivators and that reason and identity together explain the actions, choices, and strategies of international actors far better than reason or identity alone. Readers of this book will discover, as I have, that human agency is really a *rational plus* agency, and although its rational nature helps us understand and even predict it to some extent, all that constitutes the *plus*—culture, identity, values, religion—make it more fascinating, complex, and compelling.

Writing a book is usually a collective enterprise. Even though I alone am listed as an author, I am indebted to the support and guidance of many without whom this book would not have been possible. Needless to say, these individuals are not responsible for any shortcomings; they have a share only in its merits.

I am grateful to my teachers who have been so generous with their time and advice and have played a significant role in my intellectual development. I am grateful to Andy Bennett, who was chair of my dissertation committee and who still guides me in my academic life. His rigor and his openness went a long way toward making this book worthy of publication. I wish to thank Nicholas Onuf not only for fathering constructivism but also for sparking and sustaining my interest in constructivism, social theory, and things that matter most.

John Esposito, my friend and mentor, still ensures that I never miss the big picture. He also made sure that I paid attention to key details. He still cares if I am making progress and for that I am very grateful.

Mark Warren tried his best to ensure that this book had philosophical depth, and more than that he inspired in me the desire to become a political theorist. Josh Mitchell taught me to understand the relationship

between theology and philosophy and gave me the self-confidence to not forget who I was while writing this book. John Voll inspired in me a respect for balancing passion with rigor, and Mohiaddin Mesbahi taught me that the life of letters is a spiritual existence that transcends all other forms of worship.

This book took six years to write, revise, and prepare for publication. I am grateful for the prayers of my parents; the love and support of my wife, Reshma; and my kids, Rumi and Ruhi. My father, who unfortunately will not see this book, still stands as a foundational pillar behind this book, because what he taught and gave me still moves and guides me. My wife, Reshma, has supported me throughout the endeavor and deserves to be mentioned as a co-author.

I am also grateful for the support from my colleagues and students at Adrian College, my friends at the International Institute of Islamic Thought, and Georgetown University.

Al-Farabi, the famous Islamic philosopher, claimed that true happiness came from the pursuit of knowledge. Above all I am grateful to God for allowing me to live a life of true happiness.

M. A. Muqtedar Khan
Adrian, Michigan
July 2004-

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction:
A Divided Discipline

The end of the cold war had opened up opportunities for advancing new theoretical analysis of the nature of world politics.[1] Indeed the failure of all existing approaches, orthodox as well as critical, to predict and then explain the abrupt collapse of the bipolar order and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, warranted a rethinking of international relations theory.[2] Much reflection and contemplation has since taken place. While more space has opened up for hitherto marginalized approaches, the hegemonic duo—neorealism and neoliberalism—still retain much of their past currency. Only certain constructivist formulations, particularly those that depend strongly on positivist methodology, have gained some ground.[3] However, as far as the concept of identity and its role in politics is concerned, interpretivist-sociological approaches in tandem with positivist constructivism have had a significant impact on post–cold war theories.[4]

The end of the cold war's bipolarity has weakened the capacity of international *power structures* to influence international relations. As a consequence, *agency* has become more significant.[5] New kinds of actors based on ethnic, religious, and ideological identities are proliferating and gaining global reach. The recent discovery of the global character of the terror network of al-Qaeda, a nonstate international agent, is indicative of how agency is proliferating as well as becoming global in reach and impact. This growing importance of agency is drawing the attention of theoreticians to the properties of agents even as they struggle to free themselves from an obsession for structural properties—such as distribution of power, anarchy, polarity, and hierarchy. *Identity* has emerged as the most impor-

tant property of global agents and increasingly theorists are focusing on it. In spite of the increased attention that agents and their property of identity have attracted there is still a need for a comprehensive theory of agency in international relations.[6]

Meanwhile the ontological foundations of theoretical orthodoxy—rational-choice assumptions—continue to dominate, unperturbed by their failure to either predict or explain the abrupt structural transformation of world politics.[7] Rational-choice assumptions about the nature of *agency* and *interests* increasingly inform theories of international relations. The dominant research programs, neorealism and neoliberalism, are united in their assumption that interests of states are exogenously/structurally determined and that states use an economic calculus of cost/benefit to make strategic choices,[8] which may lead to cooperation or conflict. In the area of international political economy, a growing subfield of IR, the prominence of rationalist approaches is now well established.[9] This is also evident from the recent attempt by the field's major scholars to once again reassert the epistemological hegemony of "positivist science" as the only legitimate way to seek knowledge.[10] The rationalist-positivist combination is rapidly closing the windows of opportunities that the end of the cold war had opened.

The interpretivist and sociological approaches have gained a significant foothold through the increasing use of the concept of identity and it will be difficult to marginalize them once again without creating debilitating fissures within the discipline.[11] This struggle for paradigmatic domination has already taken an ugly turn in the area of comparative politics.[12] The discipline of international relations remains relatively free of such a contentious dispute for two reasons. One, rational-choice theorizing has already gained dominance as both neorealist and neoliberal research programs have increasingly adopted it as the philosophical basis for their theories even before the end of the cold war. Secondly, the interpretivist theorists in international relations consist primarily of postmodern and critical genre and they have yet to gain the status of an independent "research program."[13] There is still an increased use of sociological concepts such as identity, culture, ideas, and norms that is allowing interpretivist approaches to consolidate their foothold.[14]

THE PROBLEM OF PARTIAL TRUTHS

The failure of IR theory, the rationalist as well as interpretivist, to anticipate the structural transformations in world politics such as the end of the cold war, dissolution of the Soviet Union, the democratization of eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, the break up of Yugoslavia, the expansion of NATO, and the rise of global terrorism, has exposed the limitations of theory itself.[15] I believe that rather than advancing a com-

prehensive understanding and explanations of world politics, rational and interpretivist approaches are *merely grasping partial truths* about world politics. These partial truths may help in advancing theoretical justifications backed by selective empirical evidence for each approach's fundamental assumptions, but these partial truths fail to advance an understanding of international relations that would minimize surprises and puzzles.

The primary reason why rationalist and interpretivist approaches grasp partial truths is because they employ reductionist assumptions about the ontology of agency and structure. For the rationalist the identity and interests of agents, and the constraints and opportunities of structure, are "given," therefore unproblematic and outside the scope of scientific inquiry. For the interpretivist, nothing is "given," everything about agents and structures is imminently contestable, contingent, and constructed. Therefore the identities and interests of agents, as well as the constraints and opportunities of structure, are open to philosophical inquiries.

For rationalists "reality" is tangible and immediate and can be objectively mirrored in scientific concepts. For the interpretivists it is always discursively mediated and constructed, and never immediate. It can only be narrated by subjective discourses. Truth, I contend, lies somewhere in the middle. Reality is indeed complex and multifaceted. There are permanent, as well as temporal, aspects to reality. Some dimensions are essential others existential. Some elements change, others are permanent. Similarly some aspects are given/natural/exogenous and objective while others are constructed/cultural/endogenous and subjective. To hold one view at the exclusion of the other is to locate one's cognitive framework at an extreme end of the ontological spectrum. This ontological dogmatism leads to the privileging of partial truths as complete explanations of phenomena under scrutiny.

The intellectual humility that has accompanied the realizations about the limits of contemporary theories provides an excellent opportunity to correct this philosophical reductionism that "subverts the sciences of international relations." I propose to incorporate more complex and less reductionist ontological assumptions about agency in order to escape the dilemmas of partial truths. I propose to bridge rationalist and interpretivist approaches by incorporating central aspects of their ontology into a *rational constructivist approach* to the study of international relations.

RECONCILING RATIONALIST AND INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES

The need to reconcile the differences between rationalist and interpretivist approaches has been felt by many other political scientists and sud-

denly we are witnessing the emergence of many such projects. Robert Keohane, the leading rationalist institutionalist, writes:

Rationalistic theory can help to illuminate these practices, but it cannot stand alone. Despite the ambitions of some of its enthusiasts, it has little prospect of becoming a comprehensive deductive explanation of international institutions. . . . From this perspective rationalistic theories seem only to deal with one dimension of a multidimensional reality: they are incomplete, since they ignore changes taking place in consciousness.[16]

In an interesting initiative, Prof. Robert Bates of Harvard and Prof. Barry Weingast of Stanford have attempted to integrate rational-choice and interpretivist approaches. In a paper called "A New Contemporary Politics: Integrating Rational Choice and Interpretivist Perspectives," they emphasize the need to integrate formal and traditional approaches to comparative politics.[17] They recognize the values of each approach and use case studies to highlight the similarities and differences between each approach. However, their paper focuses on the methodological aspects of the two approaches and essentially suggests that rational choice can explain more than interpretivists are willing to concede.[18]

They do not venture into the realms of ontology and epistemology, wherein lie the fundamental differences that separate the two approaches. I do not think that these two approaches, which trace their lineage back into the basic schism in enlightenment's approach to knowledge—science vs. hermeneutics—can be reconciled through methodological adjustments.[19] Nonetheless, the fact that a prominent rational-choice theorist like Bates has repeatedly called for, and taken an initiative toward, the integration of the two approaches underscores the significance of the project. Bates has elsewhere expressed the need to include sociological and cultural concepts to improve the explanatory performance of positive political economy.[20] He has also expressed the need for training social scientists in both traditions.[21]

Ashutosh Varshney approaches the problem from the interpretivist end of the ontological spectrum.[22] Varshney, unlike Bates and Weingast, does not hesitate in problematizing "rationality." He invokes the Weberian conception of "value-rationality" to argue that if value-rationality was assumed as a property of the actor we would be able to better understand and explain the politics of identities using rational-choice methods.[23] He makes an interesting distinction between rational-choice assumptions and rational-choice methodology, and is basically calling for reconstituting rational ontological assumptions without re-engineering rational methodology.

The third attempt, a constructivist project by Peter Katzenstein and colleagues, is the most substantial theoretical, as well as empirical, effort to integrate the two approaches. Katzenstein and colleagues see their

project as an attempt to reconcile rational and cultural analysis. Katzenstein describes their intentions as follows:

... this book seeks to redress the extreme imbalance between structural and rationalist styles of analysis and sociological perspectives on questions of national security.[24]

Without directly problematizing the fundamental and constitutive elements of the rational approach, such as its ontology and its neglect of subjectivity, Katzenstein and colleagues recommend the inclusion of "sociological concepts" such as identity, norms, and culture, into consideration when "defining" national security. They identify with the fundamental concerns of interpretivists when they argue that identity is a source that shapes interest and not a resource that actors can manipulate and deploy in the pursuit of self-interest, but do not capitalize on it by fully developing an interpretivist theory of agency. They continue to work with a rational agent who now has an identity.[25]

In the second chapter, Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein identify the four arguments that underpin their theoretical contribution.[26] First, they point out how they have incorporated the concepts of identity, norms, and culture into a literature that until now did not really employ these "sociological concepts." Second, they contend that social structures or culture and norms determine the identity of actors (states), and these identities in conjunction with the social structure shape interests and finally the policies of states. Third, they insist that their efforts involve only a theoretical departure as opposed to an epistemological one. Finally, they posit state identities and environmental structures (norms and culture) in a mutually constitutive relationship. Which means norms and culture influence state identities and through that their interests and policies, and state policies then reproduce and reconstruct the same environmental structures. They argue that methodologically they remain "conventional."[27] They deny any privileging of subjectivity[28] and insist that their methodology is compatible with social scientific process of inference.

Katzenstein and colleagues have made significant advances towards bridging the rational and cultural divide. By attaching significance to a socially constructed identity's theoretical leverage they have clearly stepped out of the realm of economic political science and ventured into the realm of social political science. In the former realm, "rationality" is predominant and agent actions are assumed to be, necessarily, a rational response to the structure of expected outcomes in any given situation. While in the later realm, a socially constructed subjectivism gives "meanings" to various outcomes and actors chose the most "meaningful outcome" and not necessarily the most rational one. But unfortunately, Katzenstein and colleagues missed an excellent opportunity to advance a comprehensive theory of agency.

All the above attempts to bridge the gap between rationalist and interpretivist approaches seem to be guarded and limited in their scope. While Bates focuses on methodological adjustment, Katzenstein and colleagues try theoretical innovation, and Varshney problematizes the idea of rationality. I believe the key to this philosophical problem is ontological. It is embedded in how we conceive the very nature of agency. In this book, I will redefine the nature of agency in order to escape the ontological dogmatism and the tyranny of partial truths that plagues theories of international relations.

CONSTRUCTIVISM: A MIDDLE PATH?

Katzenstein and his colleagues had the right idea. The way to bridge the gap between rationalists and interpretivists is through a judicious use of constructivism. I believe that constructivism provides the ontological and epistemological opportunities to simultaneously observe objective structures and subjective interpretations of these structures in the light of agents' ideas, identities, and values and still make some sense of social reality and international politics. During the course of this project I shall add modifications to the basic assumptions of constructivism. I believe that the path to more comprehensive understanding and explanations of socio-political phenomena can be accomplished by constructivist approaches.

Constructivism is basically a middle path that seeks to negotiate the dichotomies that have created cleavages in social theory and philosophy of science. Some of these important dichotomies are epistemology/ontology, structure/agent, material/discourse, explanation/understanding, objective/subjective, rational/cultural, real/social, political/ethical, positive/normative, and absolute/relative. Constructivism seeks to avoid the extremes, and in doing so provides a metatheory—research program—that can support theories which can lay claim to the richness of both science and hermeneutics.

Constructivism is not a particular theory of international politics. We could develop theories of international politics, organizations, society, and culture based on constructivist premises. Emanuel Adler recently advanced the notion that constructivism seizes the middle ground between rationalism and poststructuralism.[29] I agree with Adler. However, I contend that constructivism is better understood as the middle ground between rationalist and interpretivist approaches rather than just rationalism and poststructuralism.

While rationalists and positivists maintain the objectivity of reality, interpretivists argue that any conception of reality must be *discourse dependent*. For rationalists reality exists in the material form, independent of our accounts and can be represented or mirrored through disciplined nar-

ratives. The interpretivists reject the possibility of representing reality, be-
cause it is inconceivable to separate the subject from the object. Therefore
discussions of independent reality are meaningless. For the interpretivists
discourse is primordial and any understanding of the material world is
therefore conveyed through interpretations of texts.

Constructivists are in the middle. For them reality is mediated. They
recognize the independent existence of reality but also concede that it
cannot be represented without the mediation of language, texts, and prac-
tices. Thus, our understanding of the material world is determined by
material, social, and discursive components—*reality is socially constructed.*
These insights when extended to the realm of international relations sug-
gest that constitutive elements such as states, international and domestic
political structures, sovereignty, and anarchy are all socially constructed.[30]

On the subject of the production of society, both rationalists and post-
modernists are structural. For the rationalist theorist, material structures
determine social behavior, and for the postmodernist it is discursive struc-
tures that are determinants of social reality. The constructivists maintain
that *society is mutually constituted* by the inseparable interaction of struc-
tures and agents. Structures are both the medium and product of agent
action, they enable and disable agency, they constitute and are constituted
by agents.[31] Similarly international relations are a consequence of the
structuration process between structure and states.

The middle ground approach of constructivism has tremendous appeal.
It appears to be the best available ontological-epistemological combina-
tion that can bridge the gap between rationalist and interpretivist ap-
proaches. Adler in his assessment of constructivism says:

Thus constructivism is an attempt, albeit timid, to build a bridge between the
widely separated positivist/materialist and idealist/interpretive philosophies of
social science.[32]

However, there is much confusion about what constructivism really
means. All the three earliest constructivists, namely Nicholas Onuf, Fried-
rich Kratochwil, and Alexander Wendt, have different or at least varying
conceptions of constructivism. Onuf and Kratochwil epistemologically
privilege an interpretivist approach, while Wendt is increasingly posi-
tivist. Onuf is eager to distance himself from the neorealist-neoliberal
agenda, while Wendt seems to be saying—when I fully develop I want to
be like Waltz! The distinction between structure and practice is obfuscated
in Wendt's rendering of constructivism, while Kratochwil unambiguously
underlines the constitutive character of practice.[33]

Both Onuf and Kratochwil have demonstrated a distracting inclination
to indulge in discussion that would be more of interest to social theorists
and even philosophers than scholars of international relations. This is

compounded further by the deeply philosophical nature of issues at hand. Together these two artifacts have made the constructivism of Onuf and Kratochwil less accessible than Wendt's rendition. Wendt deserves the credit for bringing constructivism to center stage in theoretical debates of international relations. Therefore, while there exists different versions of constructivism, Wendt's rendering has gained more visibility.

Therefore, in order to recognize the diversity within constructivism, and to distinguish my own approach from Wendt's, I will have to resort to an exercise in classification. Table 1.1 identifies the differences between prominent constructivists and my own approach along various ontological and epistemological assumptions. The evolution of constructivist ideas can now, based on this comparison, be given different names in order to recognize the diversity and difference in constructivist approaches.

Wendt is clearly a structural constructivist. Onuf and Kratochwil are both less positivist and less structuralist than Wendt and significantly more interpretivist. Often they have been confused as poststructuralist, leading Onuf to use the term "late-modernist" to differentiate himself from the postmodernist without embracing the modernist/positivists. I consider Onuf and Kratochwil as the pioneers of constructivism in international relations theory and would like to reserve the term "constructivism" to indicate their set of constructivist assumptions. I would like to describe Wendt's approach as "structural constructivism" and my own approach as "rational constructivism."

In his definition of what constructivism stands for, Alex Wendt makes two significant departures from constructivism (Onuf and Kratochwil). Both Onuf and Kratochwil deal with institutions as manifestations of the structuration process where both structure and agency meet. Thus for Onuf, an institution is both an agent as well as a regime that represents patterned-rule-governed behavior. For Kratochwil they are the essence of "practice." However, Wendt in his applications distances himself from this structurationist strategy to balance agency and structure, and privileges structure alone. I quote him:

Mearsheimer obscures the fact that constructivists are structuralists. Indeed one of our main objections to neorealism is that it is not structural enough: that adopting the individualistic metaphors of microeconomics restricts the effects of structures to state behavior, ignoring how they might also constitute state identities and interests.[34]

Even though Wendt recognizes that structures exist only at the instantiation of agents, he is still willing to argue that agent identities, as well as agent interests, are constituted by social structures.[35] However, I see identity and interests as constitutive of social structures and agent action.

Table 1.1
Diversity in Constructivism

	A. Wendt	N. Onuf	F. Kratochwil	M. Khan
Rationality	Low	High	Medium	High
Identity	High	Low	High	High
Scientific	High	Low	Low	High
Narrative/Interpretive	Low	High	High	Medium
Structuralist	High	Medium	Medium	Contingent
Agent-centered	Low	Medium	Medium	Contingent
Positivism	High	Low	Low	Medium
Relativism	Low	Medium	Medium	Low
Pragmatism	Medium	Medium	Medium	High
Predictive Potential	Low	Low	Low	High

I am not willing to undermine agency that is central to understanding structural change.

Secondly, Wendt explicitly distances himself from rationalism. For him, agent identities and interests are socially constructed. Everything is, therefore, mediated by circumstance. There are no determinants of action that are not socially mediated. I, on the other hand, believe that agents are to some extent rational and their rationality is circumscribed by their identity and structural constraints. Thus, my approach is less structural, and more rational, than Wendt's.

Moreover, Wendt is increasingly positivist in his approach. On the contrary, I recognize that constructivists are attempting to incorporate the objective as well as subjective aspects of reality in their explanation of social phenomenon. This means that they have to recognize the distinction between the observer and the observed. This is a cardinal assumption of positivism, and constructivists cannot uphold it. Thus, recognizing that in order to provide a true picture of the social reality that determines social action, I will have to account for reality that exists by itself, that is capable of providing resistance to human action, as well as describe the social constructions of reality that also influence agents' conception of their selves and moderate their actions. Thus, while Wendt's accounts get more structural, my own analysis will reflect a greater sensitivity to the interpretation of agents. I shall take into account narratives of agency to understand how particular agents construct reality, to identify the meanings that they attach to events, and to let identities emerge from the agent rather than from some exogenous deductions that neglects the agent's

conception of the self. Therefore, my approach, "rational constructivism," will allow room for agents' subjectivity in any analysis of international relation's phenomenon.

Unlike the earlier constructivists, Onuf and Kratochwil, my own approach to methodology is far more eclectic. Even though I am convinced that we can gain more substantive theoretical mileage by working with new ontological assumptions, I am also convinced that the cause of truth and knowledge can only be served through a more eclectic and pluralistic approach to epistemology.

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

The central questions that this project seeks to answer are: when are agents' choices shaped completely by structural factors, and when do agents act in a manner that challenges structural imperatives? Is there a difference in the nature of agents (*identity*) that makes them act differently under similar structural conditions? The answers to these questions advance a theory of choice that will identify the types of actors that will act in a transformative fashion (challenge the system) and seek *change*, and those that will act in accordance with the structure (reproduce the system) and maintain *continuity*. These questions also address two important dilemmas in international relations (IR) theory. The first dilemma is a metatheoretical conundrum—the agent-structure problem—that seeks to resolve the question: are agents constituted by structures, or are structures constituted by agents? The second dilemma is the ethical puzzle: when/which actors allow power considerations to dictate their choices/actions, and when/which actors let moral compulsions guide their choices/actions in international politics?

The two dilemmas are basically different manifestations of the same problem: when do agents act according to the structure and when do they challenge it? If the system structure is understood largely in neorealist terms, as distribution of material/military power, then acting according to the structural imperatives, or following the "rules of the game," is essentially acting according to power considerations. If economic power is also included within the notion of capabilities, then acting according to the rules would imply basically minimizing the cost of action within the system. But acting in a manner that challenges the rules "governing the system" implies that either the actor is ignoring power calculations and is acting in accordance to some other compulsion (morality/identity), or the actor is deliberately seeking to transform the system by acting in a manner that rejects the prevailing order. It must, however, be remembered that all actors that are seeking system transformation and structural shifts are not necessarily moral actors. Many of them may only be counter-hegemonic forces interested in replacing one domination with another.

These two problems in IR theory can be stated in very simple terms for analytical purposes as follows. International agents sometimes appear to act *strategically*, that is, they take into account their own material benefits, the systemic distribution of power, and the prevailing regimes of acceptable behavior (determined by the distribution of power). Otherwise, international agents seem to act *symbolically*, in defense of their identity and in accordance with their cultural/normative values. Agents seem to constantly struggle between *strategic choices* and *symbolic choices*.[36] While this much is self evident, what is not clear is when/which international agents will act symbolically, disregarding prevailing regimes and power considerations; and when/which agents will act strategically, paying due respect to prevailing regimes and power considerations? For what kind of actors, and when, does identity or normative/cultural values become so significant that actors will risk survival and material harm in order to realize symbolic gains?

The study of the two types of choices/actions is not in any way alien to contemporary IR theory. They have been dealt with quite thoroughly by the rationalist and the interpretivist approaches.[37] The rationalist approach privileges the international actor as a rational agent and constructs all decisions and choices made by these rational agents as *strategic choices.* On the other hand, the interpretivist approach privileges the agent as a cultural actor. Interpretivists, who are otherwise hypersensitive to the role of power in knowledge production, ignore the role of power and construct all choices and decisions made by agents as *symbolic choices.*

While these two approaches reach diametrically opposite conclusions about the nature of agency in international politics, they are both similar in their preference for structure as an explanatory variable. For the rationalists, structure is essentially the "rules of the game" that emerge as a consequence of the distribution of material (military and economic) power.[38] This material structure determines the strategic choices made by rational agents. For the interpretivists, structures are social: they emerge as a consequence of symbolic interactions and through a distribution of meanings (cultural and normative).[39] The social structure that acts as a normative set of constraints determines the symbolic choices made by reflexive agents.

However, because both these approaches are structural, they offer insights into understanding continuity but will fail to explain structural change (changes in the explanatory variable). Thus, if one seeks to understand change, one would have to reverse the causal logic and treat the explained variable (agent choices/actions) as the explanatory variable and treat structure as the explained variable. In this setup, social and material structures are clearly seen as products and not determinants of agent choices and actions. Agents in this scenario are constitutive and transformative. Therefore, when agents act in a certain manner when they are

seeking to alter structures or produce new ones, they are not acting according to the materially or socially constituted "rules of the game." They are clearly acting according to norms and values exogenous to the prevailing system but endogenous to their identity. How can we understand this phenomenon in international politics? Certainly, the rationalist and the interpretivist approaches with their structural perspectives, cannot account for it.

We need a theoretical approach that will understand actions and choices from the perspective of agency.[40] We need to understand how identity influences agents' choices and actions in world politics. In order to do that, we need a third alternative that integrates the strategic, as well as the symbolic, dimensions of agency and can explain both strategic and symbolic choices/actions. Constructivism presents itself as a viable media for a theory of agency that will account for both strategic and symbolic interaction in world politics. But lately constructivism too has become structural[41] and has failed to realize its potential for a theory of agency in world politics.[42] In this book I shall exploit the constructivist potential for understanding agency and advance a constructivist theory of choice/action in international relations.

NOTES

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