

Examine the
distinctions between
theories of
international relations
politics ess...



Critically examine the distinctions between explanatory and constitutive theories of international relations, illustrating your argument with insights from a variety of theoretical perspectives

The distinction between explanatory and constitutive theory is a contested issue that has emerged as a result of the contemporary way of framing issues in International Relations. I will argue that this is an ambiguous and superficial distinction that when pressed to categorise theoretical concepts requires an oversimplification and carries a danger of negligence. I then offer an alternative categorisation; that put forward by Robert Cox (1981): problem-solving and critical theory. I conclude by arguing that the act of categorising in itself is highly problematic.

Explanatory theory views the world as something external to our theories, indentifying a number of key factors and then predicting a range of outcomes on the basis of a few important causal factors. (Kurki & Wight, 2007, p. 28) In contrast, constitutive theory argues that our theories help construct our world and that we cannot separate subject and object as a causal relationship; but instead theory and practice are embedded. The epistemology of explanatory theory is positivist, arguing that we can have authentic value- free knowledge based upon sense experience and methodologically using empirical data to produce universal conditionals. (Baylis et al., 2008, p. 177) Constitutive theory rejects this epistemological and methodological approach, arguing that human knowledge is not based on neutral foundations, but rather upon human conjectures. Instead, constitutive theory is concerned with the study of how norms, rules and

ideas are constituted in social objects; preferring to study from a meta-theoretical perspective. (Kurki & Wight, 2007, p. 29)

Realism, an orthodox theory, is regarded as a classic example of explanatory theory. (Kurki & Wight, 2007, p. 28) Realism claims that politics and society are governed by objective laws based upon a fixed conception of human nature. (Morgenthau, 1967) The Realist conception of human nature has its roots in the Hobbesian man; a creature of self-preservation, countless appetites and desires; when added to the anarchical state of nature the life of man is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” (Hobbes, 2008, p. 84) This image of man is then extrapolated into the state and world order, giving Realism a rational outline that concludes that states are by nature ‘power maximizers’. (Rosenberg, 2001, p. 17) This concept of power “imposes intellectual discipline upon the observer, infuses rational order into the subject matter of politics” (Morgenthau, 1967) and produces the idealistic[1] conception of a ‘balance of power’. Overall, Realism advocates a broad positivist scientific epistemology by a determinate causal relation between the object and subject i. e. the fixed objective nature of man into a subjective social power relation between states.

Another orthodox explanatory theory is said to be Liberalism, which sets out a common positivist epistemology and ontological emphasis on human nature. The Liberal perspective accepts the Realist ontology of human nature and state-centricity, but differs by emphasising the rational qualities of individuals and a faith in the progress of social life. Despite the fixed conception of human nature, man is able to cooperate and construct a peaceful society. (Russett, 2007, p. 96) Although not denying the <https://assignbuster.com/examine-the-distinctions-between-theories-of-international-relations-politics-essay/>

international system is anarchical, “ there is a disagreement as to what this means and why it matters.” (Baldwin, 1993, p. 4) Liberalism has a belief in democratic governments, economic interdependence and international law and institutions, in a series of ‘ feedback loops’ each factor strengthening the other and leading to a self-perpetuating peaceful system. (Russett, 2007, p. 107) In a sense Liberalism breaks from away from the Realist conception of man, to a more central role of rational individuals cooperating and constructing a peaceful society. Once more Liberalism applies a positivist methodology by relating the agency of human nature as the ontological basis and predicting structural power relations between states.

So far I have focused upon two generalised orthodox theories and argued that both categorise neatly within the explanatory bracket. However, when moving to the third ‘ paradigm’ of International Relations theory – Marxism – we find that the distinctions become obscure and potentially misleading if operated negligently. Marxism’s methodology operates on a dual basis of dialectical and historical materialism; if taken separately I believe Marxism can wrongly be defined as explanatory theory, whereas, taken in its correct dual sense Marxism bridges the gap between explanatory and constitutive theories.

Firstly, dialectical materialism is a theory of struggle and must be understood as in direct opposition to idealism. Contrary to the orthodox theories, dialectics does not regard nature as an accidental agglomeration of things, independent and isolated – such as the ontological basis of power and human nature – but a connected and integrated whole, in which things are organically interdependent. The dialectical methodology is holistic and <https://assignbuster.com/examine-the-distinctions-between-theories-of-international-relations-politics-essay/>

therefore holds that we cannot understand the phenomena in nature, if isolated from surrounding phenomena. Contrary to orthodox theory, human nature is not in a state of rest, fixed and immobile, but in a state of continuous movement and change. This dialectical approach has important implications for the way in which Marxism studies social life, removing it from a simple object and subject split, whilst also distinguishing its methodology from orthodox theory. As Marx himself put it, “ as soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists.” (Marx & Engels, 1970, p. 48) Nevertheless, Marxism still retains an element of explanatory quality, as dialectical materialism envisages a process of development; where qualitative changes occur not gradually, but rapidly and abruptly, leaping from one state to another; not accidentally, but as a natural result of gradual quantitative changes in the unfolding of contradictions inherent in nature. (Stalin, 1938) This dialectical process results in Marxist methodology to scientifically predict the eventual downfall of capitalism to a higher stage of communism.

The mistake often made with Marxism is to highlight the objective factors as primarily driving revolutionary change. Instead, by incorporating a reading of Marxist historical materialism, we begin to understand that objective factors inevitably give rise to revolts and not revolution; i. e. objectively the stock market will crash due to the structure of capitalism, giving rise to a subjective revolt. By incorporating historical materialism, Marxism focuses on the subjective factors alive within an epoch of history and seeks to measure the factors for revolution and the factors against; objective factors can include unintentional structures of exploitation and alienation; giving rise to

subjective necessity to find a job, or join a union. It is this dialectical interrelation of object and subject that informs the Marxist methodology.

Contrary to explanatory theory, which asserts that theory can be separate from practice, and that value-free knowledge is possible due to our sensations, ideas and perceptions; Marxist materialism holds that matter is primary, since it is the source of our ideas, and that our theory is derivative, a reflection of matter and practice. “ One cannot separate the thought from matter which thinks. Matter is the subject of all changes.” (Marx, 2001, p. 167) Whatever the material conditions of life of a society, such are the ideas and theories about them “ it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” (Marx, 2001, p. 425) In summation, Marxism has scientific qualities and foundational epistemology similar to explanatory theory; yet, by its break towards a more holistic methodology and historical materialist ontology, marks a nascent stage of constitutive theory.

The Marxist ideological hypothesis marks a transition towards ‘ Post’ theoretical concepts. Post-structuralism claims that interpretation is void of any objectivity and as such political leaders, social activists, scholars and students all actively engage in a interpretation of ‘ the world’ that is ideological. Post-structuralism attacks the Realist foundational approach, highlighting how state-centric ontology results in predetermined practice; i. e. balance of power emerges as Realism marks a “ border between inside/outside, sovereign/anarchic, us/them” (Campbell, 2007, p. 216) and post-structuralism is concerned with how this inside and outside relation is mutually composed. Post-structuralism argues that these interpretations are <https://assignbuster.com/examine-the-distinctions-between-theories-of-international-relations-politics-essay/>

made from a particular ideological vantage point and hence representation cannot be abstracted from our identities; therefore post-structuralism is concerned with the discourse of identity politics. (Campbell, 2007, pp. 214-16) Post-structuralism is essentially concerned with the deconstruction of ‘truth claims’; for example, Realism, Liberalism and Marxism all have a normative position and therefore claim to have uncovered some fundamental truth about the world. (Baylis et al., 2008, p. 185) Overall, post-structuralism has a devastating critique and deconstruction of the normative element of traditional theories. However, I would argue that this meta-theoretical critique is useful in retrospect, yet, pacifying and un-politicizing by an failure to change the concrete conditions of society; otherwise contradicting its anti-normative perspective.

The distinctions between explanatory and constitutive appear to be problematic and I believe this due to the construction of explanatory theory using a framework of Realist ontology, epistemology and methodology. This forces a superficial distinction to be drawn in the shape of constitutive theory, which directly opposes Realism. Yet, when placing Marxism and to a degree Liberalism within these inflexible categories, an element of overlap is necessary. Instead, using Robert Cox’s more flexible categorisation; problem-solving and critical theory helps to show clearly the points of departure and encourage reflection on the process of theorising itself; i. e. “to achieve a perspective on perspectives.” (Cox, 1981, p. 88) Realism and Liberalism would be defined as problem-solving theory due to its negation of the prevailing social and power relationships, as well as institutions and economic structure. The second category is critical theory, it is critical

because it refuses to except the existing order as a non-historical occurrence, but question how that order came about and how it is maintained. (Cox, 1981, pp. 88-89) Overall, the problem-solving and critical distinctions offer more flexibility and clarity between theoretical perspectives. Nevertheless, the distinctions made are on a normative basis and subsequently complicate the positioning of ' post' theoretical perspectives.

To conclude, I would argue that the distinctions of Explanatory and Constitutive theory are highly problematic since the act of categorisation, in itself, leads to the creation of new discourses that can dangerously disregard important underpinnings of major theories. As Marx once famously recalled “ if this is Marxism, then I am not a Marxist” (Engels, 1890) and Foucault’s effort to escape any fixed identity through his writings, (Gutting, 2005, p. 10) illustrates the discomfort of categorisation as practice in political theory.