

John J. Mearsheimer (1995) “The False Promise of International Institutions”

- ❖ The main concern between realist and institutionalist is whether institutions markedly affect the prospects for international stability.
- ❖ **Mearsheimer’s thesis:** institutions have minimal influence on state behavior, and thus hold little promise for promoting stability in the post-Cold War world.
- ❖ **Mearsheimer’s definition of institution.** Institutions are a set of rules that stipulate the ways in which states should cooperate and compete with each other. They prescribe acceptable forms of state behavior, and prescribe unacceptable kinds of behavior. These rules are negotiated by states, and according to many prominent theorists, they entail the mutual acceptance of higher norms, which are “standards of behavior defined in terms of rights and obligations. These rules are typically formalized in international agreements, and are usually embodied in organizations with their own personnel and budgets. However, it is not the organization per se that compels states to obey the rules. Institutions are not a form of world government. States themselves must choose to obey the rules they created. In short, institutions call for the decentralized cooperation of individual sovereign states, without any effective mechanism of command.
- ❖ Mearsheimer sees cooperation in a realist world is unlikely to achieve, or at least, to sustain because of concerns over relative gains and cheating. States that worry about relative gains worry about how the pie is divided, while states, who concern about absolute gains, care only about making the pie bigger (so, their share increases).
- ❖ Theories that use institutions as major concepts: liberal institutionalism, collective security, and critical theory.
- ❖ **What is liberal institutionalism?** It focuses on explaining why economic and environmental cooperation among states is more likely than realists recognize. It mainly applies to political economy: economic and environmental issues. Institutions are an important cause of international stability. The role of institutions is to deter cheaters and protect victims. Institutions can change a state’s calculations about how to maximize gains. What are the roles of rules and institutions? Rules tie interactions between states in different issue areas. Issue-linkage creates greater interdependence between states. Structure of rules can increase the amount of information available. Rules can reduce transaction costs
- ❖ **Mearsheimer’s critiques of liberal institutionalism.** Institutions have minimal influence on state behavior and thus hold little prospect for promoting stability in a post-Cold War world. Institutions are instruments of statecraft – an endogeneity claim and have no independent effect on state behavior. If it is predictable that certain kinds of institutions will produce increased cooperation, then actors will establish such arrangements when and only when they want this outcome (this argument is in line with realist analysis). Institutionalism employs a neat dividing line to separate political economy from security issues. Conflicting views in terms of possible cooperation arise because each school studies different worlds. Neoliberal institutionalists concentrate on international political economy and the environment; realists are more prone to study international security and the causes, conduct, and consequences of wars. Neoliberalists believe that large mutual benefits are possible, thus distributional conflicts are less

important. They ignore the relative-gains concerns. They lack evidence of cooperation that would not have occurred in the absence of institutions because of fear of cheating.

- ❖ **What is collective security?** The main question in this approach is how to cause peace. They assume that military power is a central fact of life, and the key to enhancing stability in this world of armed states is the proper management of military power. Institutions are the key to managing power successfully. A basic assumption is that states behave according to the dictates of realism. The aim is to move beyond the self-help system of realism and convince states to base their behavior on three anti-realist norms: first, states must renounce the use of military force to alter the status quo; second, responsible states must not think in terms of narrow self-interest when they act against lonely aggressors, but must instead choose to equate their national interest with the broader interests of the international community; third, states must trust each other. The very purpose of collective security system is to deal with states that have aggressive intentions.
- ❖ **Mearsheimer's critiques of collective security.** Problems occur when states face multiple aggressors. The more aggressive actors there are in the system, the more doubts states will have about each other. It does not explain how states overcome their fear and learn to trust one another. It says little about anarchy and offensive capability. It does discuss states' intentions because the first two norms require states not to aggress. There are too many requirements for a successful collective security. They have low empirical records: the League of Nations after WWI, the United Nations after WWII, an attempt to create a collective security system after Cold War.
- ❖ Mearsheimer's suggestion in fixing the collective security theory: peacekeeping and concert. Peacekeeping entails third party intervention in minor-power civil wars of disputes between minor powers, for the purpose of either preventing war from breaking out or stopping it once it has begun. Concert is an arrangement in which great powers that have no incentive to challenge each other militarily agree on a set of rules to coordinate their actions with each other, as well as with the minor powers in the system, often in the establishment of spheres of influence.
- ❖ **What is critical theory?** The central aim is to seek out the contradictions within the existing order, since it is from these contradictions that change could emerge. Critical theory is a family of theories that include postmodernists, constructivists, neo-Marxists, feminists, and others. What unites them is a concern with how world politics is "socially constructed (Wendt, 1995)." Critical theory's two major claims are: structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material and these structures shape their identities and interests. The main question is how to bring about peace, and they aim to transform the international system into a "world society," where states are guided by "norms of trust and sharing." Their goal is to create peace system. Institutions are at the core of critical theory. They hope to create pluralistic security communities, where states behave according to the same norms or institutions that underpin collective security. States would define their interests in terms of the international community, where national interests are international interests. They want to create a world in which all states consider war an unacceptable practice. The key to achieving a postmodern international system is to alter state identity radically, or more specifically, to transform how states think about themselves and their relationship with other states.

❖ **Mearsheimer's critiques of critical theory.** It assumes that ideas and discourse are the driving forces that shape the world, although it recognizes that structural factors have some, albeit minor influence. Ideas matter so much because the world is socially constructed by individual human beings whose behavior is mediated by their thoughts. Critical theorists do not believe that there is an objective world out there about which we can have knowledge. Where realists see a fixed and knowable world, critical theorists see the possibility of endless interpretations of the world before them. There are no constants, no fixed meanings, no secure grounds, no profound secrets, no final structures or limits of history – only interpretation. Critical theorists cannot make a clean distinction between subject and object. Mearsheimer frames the debate between realists and constructivists as the debate between a theory of war and a theory of peace. Critical theory provides few insights on why discourses rise and fall. It cannot serve as the basis for predicting which discourse will replace realism because the theory says little about the direction change takes.