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International Security, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer, 1995), 71-81.

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John J. Mearsheimer's "The False Promise of International Institutions"[1] is welcome particularly in two respects. First, it is the most systematic attempt to date by a neorealist to address critical international relations (IR) theory.[2] Second, it reminds neoliberals and critical theorists, normally locked in their own tug-of-war, that they have a common, non-realist interest in the institutional bases of international life.[3] "False Promise" is likely, therefore, to spur productive discussions on all sides.

Unfortunately, it will be hard for most critical theorists to take seriously a discussion of their research program so full of conflations, half-truths, and misunderstandings. However, to some extent misunderstanding is inevitable when anthropologists from one culture first explore another. A dialogue between these two cultures is overdue, and "False Promise" is a good beginning.

Critical IR "theory," however, is not a single theory. It is a family of theories that includes postmodernists (Ashley, Walker), constructivists (Adler, Kratochwil, Ruggie, and now Katzenstein), neo-Marxists (Cox, Gill), feminists (Peterson, Sylvester), and others. What unites them is a concern with how world politics is "socially constructed,"[4] which involves two basic claims: that the fundamental structures of international politics are social rather than strictly material (a claim that opposes materialism), and that these structures

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For their exceptionally detailed and helpful comments I am grateful to Mike Barnett, Mlada Bukovansky, Bud Duvall, Peter Katzenstein, Mark Laffey, David Lumsdaine, Sylvia Maxfield, Nina Tannenwald, Jutta Weldes, and the members of the Yale IR Reading Group.

1. John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95). Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.
2. Other efforts include Robert Gilpin, "The Richness of the Tradition of Political Realism," *International Organization*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 287–304, and Markus Fischer, "Feudal Europe, 800–1300," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 427–466.
3. On neoliberalism and critical theory, see Robert Keohane, "International institutions: Two approaches," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (December 1988), pp. 379–396, and Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (June 1994), pp. 384–396. Mearsheimer treats collective security as a third form of institutionalism, but this is unwarranted. Collective security is an approach to international order, arguable on either neoliberal or critical grounds, not a form of institutional analysis.
4. This makes them all "constructivist" in a broad sense, but as the critical literature has evolved, this term has become applied to one particular school.

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shape actors' identities and interests, rather than just their behavior (a claim that opposes rationalism). However, having these two claims in common no more makes critical theory a single theory than does the fact that neorealism and neoliberalism both use game theory makes them a single theory. Some critical theorists are statists and some are not; some believe in science and some do not; some are optimists and some pessimists; some stress process and some structure.[5] Thus, in my reply I speak only for myself as a "constructivist," hoping that other critical theorists may agree with much of what I say. I address four issues: assumptions, objective knowledge, explaining war and peace, and policymakers' responsibilities.

Assumptions

I share all five of Mearsheimer's "realist" assumptions (p. 10): that international politics is anarchic, and that states have offensive capabilities, cannot be 100 percent certain about others' intentions, wish to survive, and are rational. We even share two more: a commitment to states as units of analysis, and to the importance of systemic or "third image" theorizing.

The last bears emphasis, for in juxtaposing "structure" to "discourse" and in emphasizing the role of individuals in "critical theory" (p. 40), 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 micro-economics restricts the effects of structures to state behavior, ignoring how they might also constitute state identities and interests.[6] Constructivists think that state interests are in important part con-

5. These are far more than differences of "emphasis," as suggested by Mearsheimer's disclaimer, note 127.

6. "Constitute" is an important term in critical theory, with a special meaning that is not captured by related terms like "comprise," "consist of," or "cause." To say that "X [for example, a social structure] constitutes Y [for example, an agent]," is to say that the properties of those agents are made possible by, and would not exist in the absence of, the structure by which they are "constituted." A constitutive relationship establishes a conceptually necessary or logical connection between X and Y, in contrast to the contingent connection between independently existing entities that is established by causal relationships.

The identity-behavior distinction is partly captured by Robert Powell's distinction between preferences over outcomes and preferences over strategies; Robert Powell, "Anarchy in International Relations Theory," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 313–344. The main exception to the mainstream neglect of structural effects on state identity is Kenneth Waltz's argument that anarchy produces "like units"; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979), pp. 74–77. Constructivists think there are more possibilities than this; see Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 391–425.

structed by systemic structures, not exogenous to them; this leads to a sociological rather than micro-economic structuralism.

Where neorealist and constructivist structuralisms really differ, however, is in their assumptions about what structure is made of. Neorealists think it is made only of a distribution of material capabilities, whereas constructivists think it is also made of social relationships. Social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices.[7]

First, social structures are defined, in part, by shared understandings, expectations, or knowledge. These constitute the actors in a situation and the nature of their relationships, whether cooperative or conflictual. A *security dilemma*, for example, is a social structure composed of intersubjective understandings in which states are so distrustful that they make worst-case assumptions about each others' intentions, and as a result define their interests in self-help terms. A *security community* is a different social structure, one composed of shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war.[8] This dependence of social structure on ideas is the sense in which constructivism has an idealist (or "idea-ist") view of structure. What makes these ideas (and thus structure) "social," however, is their intersubjective quality. In other words, sociality (in contrast to "materiality," in the sense of brute physical capabilities), is about shared knowledge.

Second, social structures include material resources like gold and tanks. In contrast to neorealists' desocialized view of such capabilities, constructivists argue that material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded.[9] For example, 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the United States and the North Koreans are not, and amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings. As students of world politics, neorealists would probably not disagree, but as theorists the example poses a big problem, since it completely eludes their materialist definition of structure. Material capabilities as such explain nothing; their effects presuppose structures of shared knowledge, which vary and which are not reducible to capabilities. Constructivism is therefore compatible with changes in material power affecting social relations

7. What follows could also serve as a rough definition of "discourse."
8. See Karl Deutsch, et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
9. For a good general discussion of this point, see Douglas Porpora, "Cultural Rules and Material Relations," *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (July 1993), pp. 212–229.

(cf. Mearsheimer, p. 43), as long as those effects can be shown to presuppose still deeper social relations.

Third, social structures exist, not in actors' heads nor in material capabilities, but in practices. Social structure exists only in process. The Cold War was a structure of shared knowledge that governed great power relations for forty years, but once they stopped acting on this basis, it was "over."

In sum, social structures are real and objective, not "just talk." But this objectivity depends on shared knowledge, and in that sense social life is "ideas all the way down" (until you get to biology and natural resources). Thus, to ask "when do ideas, as opposed to power and interest, matter?" is to ask the wrong question. Ideas always matter, since power and interest do not have effects apart from the shared knowledge that constitutes them as such.[10] The real question, as Mearsheimer notes (p. 42), is why does one social structure exist, like self-help (in which power and self-interest determine behavior), rather than another, like collective security (in which they do not).

The explanatory as opposed to normative character of this question bears emphasis. Constructivists have a normative interest in promoting social change, but they pursue this by trying to explain how seemingly natural social structures, like self-help or the Cold War, are effects of practice (this is the "critical" side of critical theory). This makes me wonder about Mearsheimer's repeated references (I count fourteen) to critical theorists' "goals," "aims," and "hopes" to make peace and love prevail on Earth. Even if we all had such hopes (which I doubt), and even if these were ethically wrong (though Mearsheimer seems to endorse them; p. 40), they are beside the point in evaluating critical theories of world politics. If critical theories fail, this will be because they do not explain how the world works, not because of their values. Emphasizing the latter recalls the old realist tactic of portraying opponents as utopians more concerned with how the world ought to be than how it is. Critical theorists have normative commitments, just as neorealists do, but we are also simply trying to explain the world.

Objectivity

Mearsheimer suggests that critical theorists do not believe that there is an objective world out there about which we can have knowledge (pp. 41ff). This is not the case. There are two issues here, ontological and epistemological.

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10. On the social content of interests, see Roy D'Andrade and Claudia Strauss, eds., *Human Motives and Cultural Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

The ontological issue is whether social structures have an objective existence, which I addressed above. Social structures are collective phenomena that confront individuals as externally existing social facts. The Cold War was just as real for me as it was for Mearsheimer.

The epistemological issue is whether we can have objective knowledge of these structures. Here Mearsheimer ignores a key distinction between modern and postmodern critical theorists. The latter are indeed skeptical about the possibility of objective knowledge, although in their empirical work even they attend to evidence and inference. Constructivists, however, are modernists who fully endorse the scientific project of falsifying theories against evidence. In an article cited by Mearsheimer, I advocated a scientific-realist approach to social inquiry, which takes a very pro-science line.[11] And despite his claims, there is now a substantial body of constructivist empirical work that embodies a wholly conventional epistemology.[12]

Mearsheimer is right, however, that critical theorists do not think we can make a clean distinction between subject and object. Then again, almost all philosophers of science today reject such a naive epistemology. All observation is theory-*laden* in the sense that what we see is mediated by our existing theories, and to that extent knowledge is inherently problematic. But this does not mean that observation, let alone reality, is theory-*determined*. The world is still out there constraining our beliefs, and may punish us for incorrect ones. Montezuma had a theory that the Spanish were gods, but it was wrong, with disastrous consequences. We do not have unmediated access to the world, but this does not preclude understanding how it works.

Explaining War and Peace

Mearsheimer frames the debate between realists and critical theorists as one between a theory of war and a theory of peace. This is a fundamental mistake.

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11. See Alexander Wendt, "The Agent-Structure Problem in International Relations Theory," *International Organization*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Summer 1987), pp. 335–370; and, for fuller discussion, Ian Shapiro and Alexander Wendt, "The Difference that Realism Makes," *Politics and Society*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (June 1992), pp. 197–223.

12. See, among others, Michael Barnett, "Institutions, Roles, and Disorder," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (September 1993), pp. 271–296; David Lumsdaine, *Moral Vision in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Samuel Barkin and Bruce Cronin, "The State and the Nation," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Winter 1994), pp. 107–130; Rey Koslowski and Friedrich Kratochwil, "Understanding Change in International Politics," *International Organization*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 215–248; Thomas Biersteker and Cynthia Weber, eds., *State Sovereignty as Social Construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); and Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Constructing National Security* (working title), forthcoming.

Social construction talk is like game theory talk: analytically neutral between conflict and cooperation.[13] Critical theory does not predict peace.[14] War no more disproves critical theory than peace disproves realism. The confusion stems from conflating description and explanation.

The descriptive issue is the extent to which states engage in practices of *realpolitik* (warfare, balancing, relative-gains seeking) versus accepting the rule of law and institutional constraints on their autonomy. States sometimes do engage in power politics, but this hardly describes all of the past 1300 years, and even less today, when most states follow most international law most of the time,[15] and when war and security dilemmas are the exception rather than the rule, Great Powers no longer tend to conquer small ones, and free trade is expanding rather than contracting.[16] The relative frequency of *realpolitik*, however, has nothing to do with "realism." Realism should be seen as an explanation of *realpolitik*, not a description of it. Conflating the two makes it impossible to tell how well the one explains the other, and leads to the tautology that war makes realism true. Realism does not have a monopoly on the ugly and brutal side of international life. Even if we agree on a *realpolitik* description, we can reject a realist explanation.

The explanatory issue is *why* states engage in war or peace. Mearsheimer's portrayal of constructivist "causal logic" on this issue is about 30 percent right. The logic has two elements, structure and agency. On the one hand, constructivist theorizing tries to show how the social structure of a system makes actions possible by constituting actors with certain identities and interests, and material capabilities with certain meanings. Missing from Mearsheimer's account is the constructivist emphasis on how agency and interaction produce and reproduce structures of shared knowledge over time. Since it is not possible here to discuss the various dynamics through which this process takes place,[17] let me illustrate instead. And since Mearsheimer does not offer a

13. On the social basis of conflict, see Georg Simmel, *Conflict and the Web of Group Affiliations* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955). This is also why I prefer to avoid the term "institutionalism," since it associates sociality with peace and cooperation.

14. Fischer's suggestion that critical theory predicts cooperation in feudal Europe is based on a failure to understand the full implications of this point; see Fischer, "Feudal Europe, 800–1300."

15. See Louis Henkin, *How Nations Behave* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1979), p. 47.

16. On the inadequacy of "realist" descriptions of international politics, see Paul Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (Summer 1994), pp. 108–148.

17. For a start, see Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation," and Emanuel Adler, "Cognitive Evolution," in Emanuel Adler and Beverly Crawford, eds., *Progress in Postwar International Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 43–88. The best introduction to processes of social construction remains Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

neorealist explanation for inter-state cooperation, conceding that terrain to institutionalists, let me focus on the "hard case" of why states sometimes get into security dilemmas and war, that is, why they sometimes engage in *realpolitik* behavior.

In "Anarchy is What States Make of It" I argued that such behavior is a self-fulfilling prophecy,[18] and that this is due to both agency and social structure. Thus, on the agency side, what states do to each other affects the social structure in which they are embedded, by a logic of reciprocity. If they militarize, others will be threatened and arm themselves, creating security dilemmas in terms of which they will define egoistic identities and interests. But if they engage in policies of reassurance, as the Soviets did in the late 1980s, this will have a different effect on the structure of shared knowledge, moving it toward a security community. The depth of interdependence is a factor here, as is the role of revisionist states, whose actions are likely to be especially threatening. However, on the structural side, the ability of revisionist states to create a war of all against all depends on the structure of shared knowledge into which they enter. If past interactions have created a structure in which status quo states are divided or naive, revisionists will prosper and the system will tend toward a Hobbesian world in which power and self-interest rule. In contrast, if past interactions have created a structure in which status quo states trust and identify with each other, predators are more likely to face collective security responses like the Gulf War.[19] *History matters.* Security dilemmas are not acts of God: they are effects of practice. This does not mean that once created they can necessarily be escaped (they are, after all, "dilemmas"), but it puts the causal locus in the right place.

Contrast this explanation of power politics with the "poverty of neorealism."[20] Mearsheimer thinks it significant that in anarchy, states cannot be 100 percent certain that others will not attack. Yet even in domestic society, I cannot be certain that I will be safe walking to class. There are no guarantees in life, domestic or international, but the fact that in anarchy war is possible does not mean "it may at any moment occur."[21] Indeed, it may be quite unlikely, as it is in most interactions today. Possibility is not probability. Anarchy as such

18. A similar argument is developed in John Vasquez, *The War Puzzle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
19. On the role of collective identity in facilitating collective security, see Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation."
20. Richard Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism," *International Organization*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Spring 1984), pp. 225–286.
21. Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), p. 232.

is not a structural cause of anything. What matters is its social structure, which varies across anarchies. An anarchy of friends differs from one of enemies, one of self-help from one of collective security, and these are all constituted by structures of shared knowledge. Mearsheimer does not provide an argument for why this is wrong; he simply asserts that it is.

Other realist explanations for power politics fare somewhat better. Although neorealists want to eschew arguments from human nature, even they would agree that to the extent human-beings-in-groups are prone to fear and competition, it may predispose them to war.[22] However, this factor faces countervailing dynamics of interdependence and collective identity formation, which sometimes overcome it. The distribution of material capabilities also matters, especially if offense is dominant, and military build-ups will of course concern other states. Again, however, the meaning of power depends on the underlying structure of shared knowledge. A British build-up will be less threatening to the United States than a North Korean one, and build-ups are less likely to occur in a security community than in a security dilemma.

In order to get from anarchy and material forces to power politics and war, therefore, neorealists have been forced to make additional, *ad hoc* assumptions about the social structure of the international system. We see this in Mearsheimer's interest in "hyper-nationalism," Stephen Walt's emphasis on ideology in the "balance of threat," Randall Schweller's focus on the status quo–revisionist distinction and, as I argued in my "Anarchy" piece, in Waltz's assumption that anarchies are self-help systems.[23] Incorporating these assumptions generates more explanatory power, but how? In these cases the crucial causal work is done by social, not material, factors. This is the core of a constructivist view of structure, not a neorealist one.

The problem becomes even more acute when neorealists try to explain the relative absence of inter-state war in today's world. If anarchy is so determining, why are there not more Bosnias? Why are weak states not getting killed off left and right? It stretches credulity to think that the peace between Norway and Sweden, or the United States and Canada, or Nigeria and Benin are all due to material balancing. Mearsheimer says cooperation is possible when core interests are not threatened (p. 25), and that "some states are especially friendly

22. For a good argument to this effect, see Jonathan Mercer, "Anarchy and Identity," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Spring 1995).
23. John J. Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56; Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Randall Schweller, "Tripolarity and the Second World War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 1993), pp. 73–103; and Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It."

for historical or ideological reasons" (p. 31). But this totally begs the question of why in an ostensibly "realist" world states do not find their interests continually threatened by others, and the question of how they might become friends. Perhaps Mearsheimer would say that most states today are status quo and sovereign.[24] But again this begs the question. What is sovereignty if not an institution of mutual recognition and non-intervention? And is not being "status quo" related to the internalization of this institution in state interests? David Strang has argued that those states recognized as sovereign have better survival prospects in anarchy than those that are not.[25] Far from challenging this argument, Mearsheimer presupposes it.

Neorealists' growing reliance on social factors to do their explanatory work suggests that if ever there were a candidate for a degenerating research program in IR theory, this is it.[26] The progressive response (in the Lakatosian sense) would be to return to realism's materialist roots by showing that the background understandings that give capabilities meaning are caused by still deeper material conditions, or that capabilities have intrinsic meaning that cannot be ignored. To show that the material base determines international superstructure, in other words, realists should be purging their theory of social content, not adding it as they are doing.[27] And anti-realists, in turn, should be trying to show how the causal powers of material facts presuppose social content, not trying to show that institutions explain additional variance beyond that explained by the distribution of power and interest, as if the latter were a privileged pre-social baseline.

Responsibility

An important virtue of "False Promise" is that it links neorealism and its rivals to the ethical responsibilities of foreign policymakers. These responsibilities

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24. Mearsheimer and Waltz both assume sovereignty, without acknowledging its institutional character; see Mearsheimer, "False Promise," p. 11, and Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 95–96.
25. David Strang, "Anomaly and Commonplace in European Political Expansion," *International Organization*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Spring 1991), pp. 143–162.
26. "Degenerating" problem shifts are adjustments to a theory that are *ad hoc*, while "progressive" shifts are those that have a principled basis in its hard core assumptions. See Imre Lakatos, "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes," in Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 91–196.
27. The significance of Dan Deudney's work lies partly in his appreciation of this point; see Dan Deudney, "Dividing Realism: Structural Realism versus Security Materialism on Nuclear Security and Proliferation," *Security Studies*, Vol. 1, Nos. 2 and 3 (1993), pp. 7–37.

depend in part on how much it is possible to change the structure of shared knowledge within anarchy. If such change is impossible, then Mearsheimer is right that it would be irresponsible for those charged with national security to pursue it. On the other hand, if it *is* possible, then it would be irresponsible to pursue policies that perpetuate destructive old orders, especially if we care about the well-being of future generations.

To say that structures are socially constructed is no guarantee that they can be changed.[28] Sometimes social structures so constrain action that transformative strategies are impossible. This goes back to the collective nature of social structures; structural change depends on changing a system of expectations that may be mutually reinforcing. A key issue in determining policymakers' responsibilities, therefore, is how much "slack" a social structure contains. Neorealists think there is little slack in the system, and thus states that deviate from power politics will get punished or killed by the "logic" of anarchy. Institutionalists think such dangers have been greatly reduced by institutions such as sovereignty and the democratic peace, and that there is therefore more possibility for peaceful change.

The example of Gorbachev is instructive in this respect, since the Cold War was a highly conflictual social structure. I agree with Mearsheimer (p. 46) that Soviet nuclear forces gave Gorbachev a margin of safety for his policies. Yet someone else in his place might have found a more aggressive solution to a decline in power. What is so important about the Gorbachev regime is that it had the courage to see how the Soviets' own practices sustained the Cold War, and to undertake a reassessment of Western intentions. This is exactly what a constructivist would do, but not a neorealist, who would eschew attention to such social factors as naive and as mere superstructure. Indeed, what is so striking about neorealism is its total neglect of the explanatory role of state practice.[29] It does not seem to matter what states do: Brezhnev, Gorbachev, Zhirinovsky, what difference does it make? The logic of anarchy will always bring us back to square one. This is a disturbing attitude if *realpolitik* causes the very conditions to which it is a response; to the extent that realism counsels *realpolitik*, therefore, it is part of the problem. Mearsheimer says critical theorists

28. Hence, *contra* Mearsheimer, there is nothing problematic about the fact that critical theorists do not make predictions about the future. What happens in the future depends on what actors do with the structures they have made in the past.

29. This is not true of classical realists; for a sympathetic discussion of the latter from a critical standpoint, see Richard Ashley, "Political Realism and Human Interests," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (June 1981), pp. 204–237.

are "intolerant" of realists for this reason (p. 42). The ironies of this suggestion aside, what matters is getting policymakers to accept responsibility for solving conflicts rather than simply managing or exploiting them. If neorealism can move us in that direction, then it should, but as I see it, neorealist ethics come down to *"sauve qui peut."*

To analyze the social construction of international politics is to analyze how processes of interaction produce and reproduce the social structures—cooperative or conflictual—that shape actors' identities and interests and the significance of their material contexts. It is opposed to two rivals: the materialist view, of which neorealism is one expression, that material forces *per se* determine international life, and the rational choice–theoretic view that interaction does not change identities and interests. Mearsheimer's essay is an important opening to the comparative evaluation of these hypotheses. But neorealists will contribute nothing further to the debate so long as they think that constructivists are subversive utopians who do not believe in a real world and who expect peace in our time.