Systemic Level Explanations

         Systemic-level explanations focus on environmental factors and the effects that they have on individual units within the system or environment. In international relations, as we have already seen, we can view the international system as the environment and the individual states as the units that interact within this environment. Systemic factors, in this context, are all of the factors that exert the same pressures on all units within the system regardless of the different characteristics that the units may exhibit. As such, these factors produce similar incentives and constraints for all the units in the system.

Imagine a situation in a class-room where a fire breaks out. We know that fire affects all human beings (and living creatures) in that room, regardless of their gender, shape, size, political affiliation and age. Any person, or living being, that is in the room will get burnt if he/she comes in contact with the fire. This means that when such a fire breaks out, we (as outside observers) can safely predict that it produces similar incentives for all individuals that are present in the room. In general, therefore, we can predict some very basic things about the behavior of individual units in such a class-room (in this case the units are the individuals in the room), as most individuals will quickly move towards the exit after identifying the source of threat. In other words, one doesn’t need to know much about the individuals in a class-room to predict what they are likely to do in the case of fire.

It is important to remember, however, that we cannot necessarily predict and explain the exact behavior of each individual in the room based only on our knowledge of a threat. For instance, some individuals might rush towards the fire in an effort to put it out, while others may simply not move from their places. While we can, therefore, offer some general predictions about the responses of the individual unit to systemic factors, we cannot offer point predictions. To explain the behavior of specific individuals in this class-room example, we need to know more about them. In short, what this analogy should suggest is that we can identify general environmental conditions in any system that produce identical incentives and constraintsfor all the constituent parts of the system. This suggests that we should be able to observe such general conditionsin the international system as well, that should affect states equally. If we could identify such general conditions, we could potentially develop a better understanding of general patterns of behavior in the international system.

As it turns out, the three major paradigms that we will focus on in this course (Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism) offer different views on the way in which systemic factors may affect international relations. They all, moreover, agree about the existence of at least one major systemic factor that characterizes the international system. That is, all three agree that the international system is marked by a condition of anarchy. Anarchy means simply the absence from the international system of a central government that possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and the ability to adjudicate conflicts of interest between states in the international system. There simply isn’t a world-government in other words, that can tell states what to do, and that can settle disputes between states, like a domestic government can. As mentioned before, pretty much all major approaches to the study of international relations agree that a condition of anarchy exists in the international system. However, the different paradigms do not agree about the effects of anarchy on international behavior among states.

The condition of anarchy, according to Realist theory, has far-reaching consequences for international relations. In fact, according to Realists, the international system resembles the state of naturedescribed by British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, in his treatiseLeviathan. Hobbes described a situation in which the absence of central government made life nasty, brutish, and short for the population, because in the absence of a strong government that could provide order and security, each and every individual had to worry consistently about their neighbors who might come and take their property and even their lives. How then, does anarchy affect international relations, according to Realists?

         First of all, it creates an endemic lack of trustamong the members of the international system.  Why is this the case? A situation of anarchy means that every actors in the system has to take care of himself (that is, has to protect his own property, life, happiness etc.) Because there is no government that will protect their property and their life from potential aggressors, states have an incentive to provide for their own security. Moreover, they cannot necessarily trust other actors in the international system, because theconsequences of trusting someone and being wrong will be disastrous. Because states cannot rely upon an outside power to settle disputes with other states, they have no choice but preparing themselves to achieve their objectives on their own power, or at the very least protect their own assets, by relying on their own capabilities. Realist theory, therefore, expects that states will have to be prepared to use force if an aggressive state seeks to take their assets or infringe on their political freedoms. By implication, this means that all states are bound to be concerned about protecting their own interests, and are likely to make preparations for doing so, even if there is no direct threat to them present, and even if they have no intentions of using their military capabilities against others. These preparations are made necessary by the simple fact that a state can fall victim to another state if it is not prepared and finds itself embroiled in a conflict of interests. Given the fact that conflicts are always possiblein any social environment (and the international system is, after all, a social environment), this simply means that states are concerned about their security, freedom, and prosperity, and that they have strong incentives to make preparations to defend themselves in times of need.

         As I explained before, anarchy has fairly tragic consequences even when there are no aggressive states in the world. Because all states have an interest to defend themselves, and because they cannot know whether another state will turn out to be aggressive, any move by one state in the system to acquire the means to defend themselves will send tremors through the system. After all, if state A sees state B acquire military capabilities, it will have to wonder if those capabilities will eventually be used against it. Just to make sure that this will never happen, state A has strong incentives to match the move by state B. The latter, which may have acquired the weapons to defend itself, and is unaware that it is signaling threatening behavior by its own weapons acquisition, may be worried and respond in kind to state A’s response. This is the classic security dilemma, where the provision of security for one self, decreases the security for others. The security dilemma, as realists note, could easily lead to escalating arms races and potential conflict itself, something they have identified as the spiral model of international relations (denoting the spiral of escalation that comes from tit-for-tat armaments)

         Insecurity is not the only thing produced by anarchy, however. As Robert Jervis points out in his article this week, it also makes it very difficult for states to cooperate, even when they can benefit from such cooperation. According to Realists, the condition of anarchy means that states cannot trust their partners to uphold their agreements. In other words, even if states can obtain mutually beneficial results from cooperation, they may choose to forego these benefits because they cannot trust their counterparts to uphold their end of the bargain.

 The Prisoner’s Dilemma is a good model for what happens to cooperation under a condition of anarchy, according to Realist theory (i.e. under a condition when two actors cannot make sure that the other side will keep their side of the bargain). In the prisoner’s dilemma two crooks, who have partnered in crime, and have been arrested together, have a choice to make. If they cooperate with one another, and do not cooperate with the prosecution, they will walk away freely as the police will not have sufficient evidence to convict them. However, if actors A cooperates with B and keeps his mouth shut, and actor B decides to switch sides and become a witness for the prosecution, the consequences for actor A will be severe. The latter will end up going to prison for a long time, while the former will get off completely free. Because they have difficulties communicating, and because they have no way to enforce their agreement (after all, if one of them squeals and the other doesn’t, the “squealer” goes free and the other goes to jail for a long time, meaning that the victim won’t be able to come after the squealer to punish him for his behavior), the prisoner’s dilemma predicts that both actors will end up cooperating with the prosecutor, because this is a better solution than finding out that they are the only ones who have kept their mouth shut.  You can actually play a few round of Prisoner's Dilema at this site.  <http://www.iterated-prisoners-dilemma.net/> According to realists, the prisoner’s dilemma illustrates well what happens in the international system when two states try to reach an agreement on cooperation. They will both be worried that the other side will defect, and as a result they will try to hedge their bets, gaining fewer benefits than they otherwise could have. Take an example from the international system: arms reductions. During the Cold War both the Soviets and the Americans realized that they were spending way too much money on building up their nuclear arsenals. This was not only very costly, but it also increased the likelihood of accidental nuclear launches and a host of other risk factor. Both of them, therefore, had an incentive to cooperate with one another to reduce the number and type of nuclear weapons. Doing so, however, proved to be very difficult to do and the negotiations about arms limitations and reductions took many years, and both sides still kept larger arsenals than they would ever need. The reason for this, according to the logic of the prisoner’s dilemma, is that both states worried that the other would renege on the agreement. Neither state had a way to compel the other to honor its agreements. Neither wanted to end up like Rachel i[n season three of the bachelor pad](http://youtu.be/wb2xTSikPdg)(watch the four-and-a-half minutes of the clip). In the end both states ended up maintaining much larger nuclear arsenals than they desired.

Anarchy, and the possibility that today’s friend may turn into tomorrow’s foe, also creates other detrimental effects on international relations. Because states cannot trust their current partners, they are always worried that in any interaction in which value is exchanged that the other side is gaining more. In political science terms, realists argue that state are concerned about relative gainsin their interactions with others. Rather than thinking how they can benefit from cooperation, states look at who benefits most. If a state believes that another state will benefit more from an interaction, it may decide to abort the interaction even if it stands to gain from it as well. For example, states may want to reduce trade barriers between them because they realize that lower trade barriers will lead to increased trade and prosperity. Realists, however, argue that states won’t actually reduce barrier if they believe that their trading partner will actually profit more from the arrangement than they do. This is also tied to another notion that Realists believe in, and that is not directly tied to anarchy, and this is that states are concerned that the international system is an arena of zero-sum gains. That is, in any interaction there is a winner and a loser, and that there can be no “win-win” situations. You can liken this to a birthday cake. If you ever watched two kids eat a birthday cake you can see from their ferociousness that they understand the concept of a zero-sum game. Every bite that kid A takes from the cake, is a bite that kid B will never taste, because the cake is finite (hence the saying that you cannot have your cake and eat it too). Therefore, kids will usually gobble up as much cake as they can in as short a period of time, even though it may leave them nauseous in the long-term. According to Realist theory, states in the international system work according to similar principles, although they usually do not fight over actual cake. They are concerned that the gains that others make will come at their own expense. As a result, anarchy makes states more competitivewith one another, especially when goods are scarce.

         In short, in an anarchical environment, states are reliant upon their own devices to stay secure and alive (self-help), and the structure of the system (anarchy) also makes communication and trust difficult to achieve, and drives states to be concerned with their continued security above all else. This does not mean that states do not have other interests, besides survival, but it means that they all share at the very least a strong concern with remaining alive in this environment.

The condition of anarchy, and the pernicious effects that it produces on cooperation and trust, makes realists focus on the importance of powerin international relations.  Power is the “commodity” that allows states to remain independentand secure. Power, gives states freedom of action and security. If a state possesses power, it does not need to worry that other states will take its assets in case of a conflict, or that other states can impose their will upon them when their interests collide. Power is also what states are concerned about when they interact with the international system. They are constantly concerned that other states may acquire more power than they, because at the end of the day, when push comes to shove, power is what will determine the outcome of conflicts. As realists have long pointed out, morality is simply not an important concept in international relations. This does not mean that they think it is not important, or that people are not moral. It simply means that they believe that in the relations between states there has been little evidence that morality matters. The strong impose their will upon the weak when they can, and the weak can seek to resist but cannot rely on anyone else to bail them out. In sum, realists argue that power has a lot to do with how states relate to one another. They observe that states seek power (for a variety of purposes), and that states respond to power. They also argue that relative power explains a lot more about the interactions between states than any broader sense of morality or justice. Again, they do not argue that this is right, they just argue that this is how the world works as they have observed (it is, unsurprisingly, why they call themselves political realists, because they purport to describe the world as it really works, not as it should work in ideal circumstances).

         Realists, therefore, explain a lot of international relations in terms of power. But what is power? Power is very difficult to measure. In general, we argue that power is the ability of one actor to make a second actor do what it otherwise would not do. While this may very well be true, there is a problem here for those trying to explain and analyze international relations. It means that we can only explain power after the fact. There may be multiple ways in which we theoretically can get people to do what they otherwise would not do: one could use bribery, one could use flattery, and one could use persuasion. One could, of course, also hit someone over the head until he/she does what we want them to. Realists have solved this problem, by measuring power primarily in terms of material capabilities.They argue that in the end, persuasion and bribery might be ways to convince, that they are not as effective as material capabilities in making sure someone else changes behavior (an example of this is the saying: “talk softly, but carry a big stick.”). According to Realist theory, powerful states have the military capabilities, or at least the potential military capabilities, to make other states pay for not heeding their demands. Realists therefore look at things like military capabilities, and economic resources to assess the relative power of states in the international system and to offer explanations and predictions for state behavior.

                 As Ben Frankel argues, much of contemporary Realist scholarship has focused on the systemic levelof analysis, that is the level that identifies broad structural factors that impacts all actors in the same way (although it does not necessary determine the exact behavior of each actor, or their exact response to environmental stimuli). At the most basic level, realists argue that systemic factors, such as anarchy, can tell us a lot about patterns of conflict and cooperationin the international system. For instance, because of their focus on anarchy, self-help, and relative gains, realists predict that there will be very little cooperation in the international system. Moreover, they predict that cooperation will be fleeting, as states are continuously trying to improve their positions and look out for new partners. Systemic Realist theory, moreover, tells us that we don’t really need to delve much into unit-level and domestic-level variables, as most states will respond similarly to the pressures and constraints of the international system: they will try to maximize their interests, and they will only retreat or compromise when they encounter actors that are more powerful than themselves.

Liberalism and Systemic Factors

         The second major paradigm in the study of International Relations diverges significantly from Realism in its basic assumptions about the international environment, and as such also offers very different explanations and predictions about the interactions among states and non-states in the international system. The most significant difference between realism and Liberalism is in their different conceptions of the primary actors in international relations, and about the nature of the international environment. Most importantly, Liberals do not agree with Realists about the effects that anarchy has on the international system (although they do agree that anarchy is an enduring systemic feature of the international system).

According to Liberal scholars, anarchy is certainly not an ideal situation, and can also lead to upheaval and conflict. However. Liberal scholars argue that there is nothing particularly immutable about realism. First of all, Liberals argue that anarchy is not necessarily permanent, and that it can be eliminated, through the creation of proper institutions (just like the condition of anarchy has been eliminated in societies, by the creation of government and proper laws). Secondly, according to Liberals, anarchy doesn’t have to have the negative effects that Realists identify, and is not an “all-or-nothing” proposition.  Anarchy, they say, can be ameliorated. For Liberals anarchy is not an ideal situation, but it is also not the terrible condition described by Realists. Whereas Realists subscribe to John Hobbes’ description of a state of nature where everyone is likely to attack anyone, and where an individual always has to be alert in order to not fall victim to others, and where life is “nasty brutish and short,” Liberals instead view anarchy from the lens of the philosopher John Locke. The latter also believed that anarchy was not great, although he argued that it wasn’t that terrible as most people are generally good, and are generally simply looking to pursue their own happiness and prosperity. For Locke, the problem with the state of nature was the possibility that some individuals in such a society were not necessarily good, and that these may prey on their neighbors. In order to address this issue, which inhibited people from pursuing the greatest good at all times, Locke argued that a social contract should be created, in which a government, with limited powers, would make sure that laws would be enacted for the protection of all. These laws would deal with the small numbers of “bad actors” in the system. Taking their cue from Locke’s description of the state of nature (anarchy), and the remedies to deal with anarchy, Liberal scholars of international relations, have argued that the international system resembles this Lockean state of nature more than the Hobbesian state of nature as Realists believe. This leads to two major implications, logically speaking. First, anarchy doesn’t have to be as detrimental and as dangerous as Realists argue. Second, and most important, the condition of anarchy can be ameliorated. That is, its effects don’t have to be negative, and its negative effects can be limited through the adoption of the right laws, by the creation of a supranational authority, or effective international institutions that will allow states to overcome the distrust and communication issues that plague actors in anarchical environments.

         Classical Liberal international relations theory, moreover, does not only assume that anarchy is not permanent, and that its detrimental effects can be diminished through human actions, it also argues that it is very likely that this will happen, because human beings are rational. Rationality, in this context, should be understood as “enlightened self-interest.” The pursuit of such enlightened self-interest will lead even those with questionable moral characters to pursue the creation of institutions that allow them to pursue life, prosperity, and liberty. In other words, according to classical Liberal philosophers, the creation of laws and the creation of a social contract has little to do with ethical values, but has everything to do with rationality, as rational beings (regardless of their nature and character) will eventually choose the political systems that are most likely to offer them the opportunity to improve their own material conditions.  As more states do so, moreover, it will eventuallyhave a marked impact on the nature of international relations, as cooperation will become easier among states. In short, because human beings are rational, they will eventually all adopt the proper institutions and become liberal democracies. Given the fact that liberal democracies are law-abiding actors, classical Liberal theory believes that a world populated by liberal states will be one where anarchy is no longer a problem, and where states will resolve their conflicts peacefully, and find it easier to cooperate.

         The 1970s saw the rise of a less optimistic version of Liberal IR theory, commonly known as Neoliberal Institutionalism. Proponents of this theory acknowledged that the international system remained anarchic (just like Realists argued), but that cooperation was still possible in such an environment. They pointed out that there was much more cooperation in the international system then Neo-Realists (systemic Realists) expected (See the article by Jervis for an in-depth analysis of the exact differences between Neo-Realists and Neo-Liberals). As Keohane points out in his article, the key to explaining such cooperation under anarchy can be found in rationality and multinational institutions. Neo-liberals, therefore, take some of the systemic-level assumptions of Realism (the focus on anarchy and the obstacles that it creates to cooperation between states), and combines them with more classical Liberal assumptions about the positive effects of institutions. As Keohane (and Jervis) argue, Neo-Liberal theory suggests that international institutions can help states overcome the main obstacles to cooperation under conditions of anarchy, because they solve the two major problems associated with the prisoner’s dilemma that I outlined earlier. First, international institutions (such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations) give states the ability to share information with one another, thereby reducing uncertainty. Second, multilateral institutions create a “shadow of the future” for states. That is, they create a reputation for cooperation (and defection). A state that reneges on an agreement to cooperate with another state in the context of an international institution will signal that it cannot be trusted, leading other states to avoid dealing with the state in the future. States that consistently honor their commitments, by contrast, can create a reputation for good behavior, increasing the chances that others will cooperate with them. In sum, both (Neo) Realism and (Neo) Liberalism focus on international systemic factors to explain broad patterns of cooperation and conflict in the international system. They agree that states mostly act rationally in response to these systemic constraints and pressures, but they disagree as to the most important factors. Realists focus on power (as measured in terms of relative capabilities), while Neo-Liberals focus on international institutions (or their absence) to explain patterns of conflict and cooperation under conditions of anarchy.

**Constructivism and International Relations**

        As we have seen, Realists and Liberals have fairly specific assumptions about how the world works, and how systemic factors affect international relations. Realists believe that anarchy is immutable and that rational states will therefore have to compete for power and influence to stay alive and to pursue their interests. (Neo) Liberals argue that rational states will find a way to ameliorate the detrimental aspects of anarchy and produce mutually beneficial institutions in a rational manner. A third, alternative, paradigm takes issue with this approach. Constructivists argue that we cannot simply determine that the international system has a single character. They argue that social interactionsbetween states determine the nature of the international system, and the quality of the interactions between states. In order for us to understand how states will interact, we need to understand the social context of their previous interactions, which will have produced norms that govern interactions. For instance, conflictual relations between states may produce an international system in which conflict is the norm. This, according to constructivists is not because of any inherent feature of anarchy or the international system, but because this is what states know, and this is what they perceive to be appropriate behavior.Constructivists, therefore, urge us to examine the social structure of the international system, in order to see what dominant norms exist. It is these norms that will tell us important things about broad patterns of behavior in the international system. For a general explanation of how social interactions produce the “rules of the game” in the international system, see the article by Alex Wendt. The article by Finnemore and Sikking focuses more on the practical process by which they believe that international norms spread and take root in the international system.

         In sum, Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism are three theoretical paradigms that offer different perspectives on how to explain international relations. All three paradigms, moreover, offer explanations at the system-level of analysis. Realism and Neo-Realism focus on anarchy as the cause of conflict and lack of cooperation, but they differ on what the implications are of anarchy. Constructivism focuses on the socially constructed nature of anarchy, and how social conventions can change (and therefore on how anarchy can be both detrimental and quite benign). It is important to note, of course, that while the systemic level of analysis can offer us some very important insights into broad patterns of cooperation and conflict in the international system, it cannot really tell us why particular actors choose to behave in particular ways. For instance, Neo-Liberal theory argues that states are more likely to cooperate in the context of multilateral institutions, but it cannot explain why a particular state decides not to become a member of an institution, or why institutions sometimes do not produce cooperative behavior. Neo-Realism can explain why states should prepare to defend themselves under conditions of anarchy, but cannot explain why some states decide not to do so (see for instance the members of the European Union, who clearly spend only a tiny proportion of their resources on preparing for eventual military conflict). In short, in order to offer more specific explanations for state behavior, we will have to go down a level of analysis. We will do so next week, when we will look at various unit-level theories of international relations.

         In approaching the readings this week, you would do best to first start off with the Frankel readings, which restates the basic assumptions of the Realist paradigms. In reading this, focus especially on the assumptions about the role that the environment, or the system, plays in the theory. Robert Keohane outlines the neoliberal institutionalist case, in his retrospective of this theoretical perspective. In reading this article, pay especially close attention to the causal arguments that Keoane offers about the relationship between institutions and cooperation. Jervis does a creditable job of comparing between Neo-Realism and Neo-Liberalism, and finds areas of agreement and (most importantly) disagreement. In reading this article you should focus on the areas of disagreement. In “Anarchy is what states make of it,” Wendt offers a very different take on the nature of the system/environment in which we interact. He suggests that those systems are the product of human interaction and intersubjective understanding. What are the implications of this argument for the nature of anarchy? Is it necessarily good or bad? How can it change, if at all? Finally, Finnemore and Sikking outline an argument for how global norms emerge, get propagated, and become mainstream. This, of course, is a practical way of looking at norms and their emergence, and does not necessarily mean that I endorse the theory. It is, however, important to understand and examine.