

CONSTRUCTIVISM HAS FAILED TO SHIFT THE IR AGENDA FROM THAT WHICH OLDER DOMINANT SCHOOLS DETERMINED. A DISCUSSION.

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ABSTRACT

Whether Constructivism is considered a solid paradigm or just an approach in International Relations (IR) Domain – a verdict which is quite too soon to be reached – it is undoubtedly a well-promising school of thought in IR. Whether Constructivism has failed to shift the IR agenda from that which older dominant schools determined or not, it is more than evident that this constitutes a still open question in both research and academic areas.

In this essay, I refer to the rise and evolution of Constructivism from the 1980s up to date highlighting its origins and its core principles. Extra attention has been given to its dynamic dialogue with other dominant schools of IR and Political Science. The dual scope of this essay is to illuminate a great number of arguments already made both against and in favour of Constructivism, in the wider field of IR Theory and in the International Security sub-field. I conclude that Constructivism's power lies in its 'weaknesses', namely its interpretation of world politics through culture and identity, especially in the currently world instability caused by the global identity crisis and spreading ISIS radical fanaticism.

Keywords: Intersubjectively shared ideas, Behaviour, Identities and interests of actors, Normative and material structures, Mutual constitution of agent and structures, Shared knowledge, Material resources, Practices, Norms, Rules, Articulation, Interpellation, Self-help, Power politics, Discourse and communication, "All politics is international"

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THE RISE AND EVOLUTION OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IN IR

Constructivism in IR is occasionally confronted as a new *approach*. In reality, it is an old methodology with its roots dating back to the work of the 18th century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. In recent times, Constructivism gained popularity after the Cold War, owing to its ability to generate novel accounts of world politics and the enduring insights of sociological and critical theory (Barnett, 2011: 149). Following the 'Third Debate' of the 1980s, the 1990s have experienced an overwhelming emergence of a new 'constructivist' approach to international relations theory (Price and Reus-Smit 1998: 259), when Neo-realism and Neo-liberal institutionalism dominated IR theory in the USA. Contemporary esteemed theoreticians of

Constructivism in IR Theory are Friedrich Kratochwil (1989), Nicholas Onuf (1989), Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999), Peter Katzenstein (1996), Jutta Weldes (1996) and Jeffrey Checkel (1998, 2003). Mainly Wendt's seminal academic work has been synonymous to the new Constructivist approach, as it came to challenge the Neo-realism's and Neo-liberal institutionalism's individualism and materialism. Constructivists' main critique on Neo-realism comprises of the fact that the latter misses the most significant factor of *intersubjectively shared ideas*, which shape behavior by constituting the identities and interests of actors.

Constructivists provide a *sociological perspective* on world politics, stressing the importance of both *normative and material structures*, the role of *identity* in the constitution of actions, and the *mutual constitution of agent*

and structures. As John Ruggie (1998) has succinctly defined it, “*constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international affairs*” (Ruggie, 1998: p. 856). Its emphasis on *socially constructed identities and interests of actors* highlights mainly the *ideational factors* emanating from human capacity and will. And although many would underline that constructivists have forged these theses into a sophisticated International Relation theory through a rapidly increasing body of empirical research (Price & Reus-Smit 1998: 259, Checkel 1998 & 2003:1), others would lightheartedly conclude that Constructivists do lack this empirical wisdom and, consequently, their theoretical set of propositions about international relations forms simply an approach, or a somewhat philosophical perspective on the empirical study of IR (Ruggie 1998, Zehfuss 2001, Jackson and Sorensen 2003). In his 1998 article, Ruggie (1998) examining the incompatibility between social constructivism and neo-utilitarianism admits that even though the former has not yet accomplished to form a fully-fledged theory, it should be included in IR field for a “*fuller understanding of the real world of IR*” (Ruggie, 1998: p. 857).

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND OTHER DOMINANT SCHOOLS

With its seminal works, especially Wendt's (1992 1999), Constructivism was regarded as an immediate assault on Structural Realism or Neo-Realism, especially an attack on Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, 1979 (Copeland, 2000, p. 187), and on Neo-liberal Institutionalism (Barnett, 2011: 149). Wendt's constructivist notion about 'social structures' consists of three elements: *shared knowledge, material resources and practices*. Social structures are partially defined by common aspirations, communications or knowledge. A 'security dilemma' constitutes a social structure comprising of intersubjective deliberations, in which states are so suspicious that are making the worst hypotheses about other states' intentions and, therefore, define their interests in terms of *self-help*. A 'security community' constitutes a totally different social structure comprising of shared knowledge, where the states trust one another for dispute settlements without resorting to war. This dependency of social structure on *ideas* proves the idealistic perception of structure by Constructivism. Human relations, international

relations included, consist literally of *notions and ideas*, and not of material conditions and powers.

While realists propose the terms of 'national interest', 'anarchy' and 'balance of power' in a more materialist perspective of international world, constructivists consider the international relations as more complicated and focus their attention on cultural, institutional and idealistic elements comprising this complex, *intersubjective world*, such as 'culture', 'national identity', 'norms', 'rules'. For a constructivist challenge of the realism's core term of 'national interests' see, for instance, Jutta Weldes's (1996) paper entitled “Constructing National Interests”, in the *European Journal of International Relations* (Weldes, 1996, pp. 275-318). Weldes, drawing from Wendt's notions and sketching the production of the US national interest during the Cuban missile crisis, supports that national interests are produced in the construction of representations of international politics through the dual mechanisms of *articulation* and *interpellation*. These mechanisms contribute to the creation of common sense, which depends upon the explicit invocation of an empiricist epistemology.

Some constructivists, ex positivist social scientists, refer to 'mechanisms and procedures of social construction' (Finnemore and Sicking 2001: 403). Other constructivists, more interested in *discourse* and *communication*, tend to realize research as going deeper into the word of humans, as an elaborate analysis of the language and conception they use, as the revelation of their acknowledgements and beliefs and as the presentation of the way all these affect and constitute their behavior (Jackson and Sorensen 2003: 253-8).

The constructivist methodology in IR bears some significant repercussions. Wendt's *self-help* and *power politics* are institutions, not constitutive parts of anarchy. If 'anarchy is what states make of it', then there is nothing inevitable or unchangeable in international politics. Nothing is for granted. The present system is a creation of the states and if states change their views about what they are, what their interests are, what they want, the situation will change accordingly, because this situation is nothing more than what these states choose and do. The states would be able to choose to reduce their dominance, for instance. If something like that happened, the international anarchy we all know would not exist anymore. On the contrary, a new

non-anarchical world would exist, in which states would be under a global governance. Maybe the states would create a world, in which they would act in terms of “the common good” (Onuf, 1995). This would be a world beyond national dominance and, at most, beyond our time.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

In an excellent and most intriguing review article entitled “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity” in *International Organization*, Fearon and Laitin (2000) examining the connection between violence and Social Construction of Ethnic Identity from the perspective of individuals –either the elites or the masses– and from supra-individual discourses of ethnicity, conclude that both rationalist and culturalist constructivists share the same challenges. According to the writers, if individualists are considered as the agents who construct ethnic identities, then constructivist “explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with rationalist, strategic analyses. And if “discursive formations” or cultural systems are seen as the agents that construct ethnic identities, then constructivist explanations for ethnic violence tend to merge with culturalist accounts” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000: 846). Consequently, they support that the overall methodological division between culturalist and rationalist accounts can be bridged. Furthermore, Maja Zehfuss (Zehfuss, 2001, p. 56) also points out that Wendt’s (1992) intention is to “build a bridge” between the liberal and the constructivist tradition and consequently to position himself between the rationalist and reflectivist camps.

Similarly, in a radically entitled article “Thucydides the Constructivist”, in *The American Political Science Review*, Richard Ned Lebow (2001) either reinforcing the critique on realism or endorsing the linguistic form of structuralism suggests that Thucydides should be considered a constructivist and “may have been the original practitioner of the thicker linguistic version”, since the latter’s history “examines how language shapes the identities and conventions in terms of which interests are defined”. Thucydides takes the constructivist argument further and implies that civil society is also what actors make of it. Moreover, International security and civil order depend upon recovering the meanings of words

and the conventions they enable. Lebow finally concludes that Thucydides can be considered both a realist and a constructivist, since stasis and omonia are equal and inherent halves of human nature (Lebow, 2001, pp. 547-560).

Finally, in the study of national security, constructivists pay special attention to the influence and consequences of culture and national identity on policies and actions of security. As about deterrence, they are particularly interested in the role of norms and taboos, which constrain the use of chemical and nuclear weapons. And in the study of military intervention they focus on institutional interrelations which encourage or discourage, permit or deter such international actions. According to Wendt (1992), the essence of Constructivism lies in “anarchy is what states make of it” (1992). But in our contemporary, globalized world comprising mainly by modern multi-national states, we can realize the dynamics of such constructivist propositions, especially if we adopt the non-conventional thesis that “all politics is international”, as Brown, Nardin, and Rengger (2002), wisely underline in the Introduction of a seminal work entitled *International Relations in Political Thought*.

CONCLUSION

Michael Barnett (2011) believes that one of the four reasons Constructivism has gained respectability is its dependence on sociological theory (Barnett, 2001, p. 153). The argument, in the first place, that Constructivism does not constitute a solid IR theory or paradigm presented mainly by eminent proponents of well-established IR paradigms on the grounds that it draws from Social Theory is, to my mind, rather too simplistic and a priori deductive. It tends to disregard both the enormous impact of excellent Constructivist scholars’ works, especially Wendt’s, Onuf’s, Kratochwil’s, on the IR domain and the main Political Thought and IR schools’ –namely, Realism’s, Liberalism’s or Pluralism’s and Marxism’s or Structuralism’s– shortcomings. I maintain that it was exactly these shortcomings that allowed Constructivism’s effect to be that great in IR domain, of course. For instance, as Peter Hugh correctly underlines in his book *Understanding Global Security*, the Marxists of International Relations are related to but not synonymous with Marxists of Political Thought, as the former are

usually ideological Marxists, but not necessarily so in political practice, as well. Marxist governments have usually pursued foreign policies that are broadly Realist in character (Hough, 2008, p. 5).

Maja Zehfuss (1984) emphasizing on Constructivist Onuf's and Kratochwil's preference for language and Wendt's for identity concludes that there are many Constructivisms in IR (p. 54). To the same conclusion, have also come Price and Reus-Smit (1998, p. 288). In the same vein, Ruggie (1998) speaks for 'variants of Constructivism' (Ruggie, 1998), pp. 880-882). Thus, as about the argument that Constructivism lacks homogeneity on the basis that even its greatest proponents use different terms, meanings or degrees of emphasis to explain its methods, I sustain that even this argument is not scientifically strong enough, as if we always accepted the established norms and procedures, then we would eventually reject the evolution of scientific paradigms of the Kuhnian logic. Moreover, if we disregarded the multiplicity and diversity of scientific methods, then all disciplines would become unbearably monolithic and eventually inefficient and obsolete. Continuing this fallacy in the IR domain would result in arguing the multidisciplinary basis of the IR as an episteme, in the first place. This nihilistic path would then lead us to a limited interpretation of the real world, as the existing IR paradigms, mainly realism and liberalism, even with or without reformulation or update of some sort, as some theorists suggest (Moravcsik 1997; Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Mearsheimer 2006) fail to predict and/or even explain new phenomena of world politics, such as globalization, the world democratization process, the transnational Indignant Movement, the spread of ISIS radical fanaticism plunging the globe, to name but a few. On the other hand, pro-Constructivism theorists, such as Finnemore and Sikkink (2001) have talked about "the increasing influence of international factors, both material and ideational, on domestic politics around the globe" and vice-versa (p. 411), and Social Movement theorists' awareness that social movements operate in both a domestic and an international environment (Barnett, Michael, 2011 pp. 160-2).

I believe that maybe it would be wiser to acknowledge that with the maturity of time Constructivism's variable empirical research and academic body has substantially expanded, and

therefore, has acquired a hard-gained status in IR domain (Checkel 1998, 2003). Barkin (2006) has distinguished an innovative compatibility between Realism and Constructivism, while Finnemore and Sikkink (2001) have acknowledged the mutually beneficial IR Constructivism's dialogue with Comparative Politics; even though the latter have underlined that "constructivism's distinctiveness lies in its theoretical arguments, not its empirical research strategies" (p. 391), they finally conclude that there is ample room for 'promising cross-fertilization' (p. 411). Having studied numerous academic works and scientifically examined Constructivism's compatibility and dialogue with other disciplines (ie. Comparative Politics), I attain that crosspollinations are mutually beneficial apart from serving the mere building-bridges scope.

Laitin (1977, 1986, 1998), also identifying himself with Rational Choice, considers himself a Constructivist, as he argues that identities are socially constructed. The uniting bridge between constructivism and rational choice lies exactly on the spot that even though identities are socially constructed, the actors may finally make rational choices about the way this construction will be attained (Finnemore and Sikkink, 2001, p. 410). And as Friedrich Kratochwil (1996) in an article entitled "Is the Ship of Culture at Sea or Returning?" examining the question of culture and identity as a research focus has put it, "where the texture of human relations is thinned as more and more people become rootless, detached, mobile" (p. 208), I tend to believe that maybe the Ship of Culture is not at sea but returning. Constructivism's power lies in its 'weaknesses', namely its interpretation of world politics through culture and identity.

The IR episteme, as part of the wider Political Science, is a sociological science. Most Constructivists' goal is to create a social science of International Relations on the basis of the Constructivist analysis of the intersubjective reality (Jackson and Sorensen, 2003: 253-8). On the contrary, Ruggie (1998) notes that social constructivists reject the pretense that their study constitutes the totality, or even, the main part of the social scientific enterprise (p. 856). The methodological problem with Constructivism is that it comprises a "split personality"; by emphasizing on intersubjectivity places itself in post positivism, thus by putting stress on the scientific interpretation places itself

in positivism.

Constructivists agree with positivists that the accumulation of reliable knowledge about the world is possible. But contrary to positivists, constructivists delineate the role of ideas and the interchange of knowledge about the world. States constitute one another through their relations and, in doing so, they also constitute the international anarchy, which defines their relations. Anarchy is not a natural condition; it is a figment of state choices.

For these dynamic concepts, Constructivism has been brutally attacked. For instance, Adler (2001) traces four constructivist IR approaches and proposes a synthesis between pragmatism and realism in his recommendation of a more methodology-focused agenda to Constructivism (p. 95). To my mind, Constructivism being one or more approaches, has not failed in shifting the IR agenda from that which older dominant schools determined and, therefore, has definitely become one of the leading schools in International Relations. Especially if someone surpassing the constructivist critique of logical positivism in IR, believes in some form of the unity of science, just as Alexander Wendt and other ex-positivist constructivists, such as Kratochwil (2000), do.

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