

Chapter 8

Constructivism

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During the 1980s two debates structured International Relations scholarship, particularly within the American mainstream. The first was between neo-realists and neo-liberals, both of which sought to apply the logic of rationalist economic theory to international relations, but reached radically different conclusions about the potential for international cooperation. The second was between rationalists and critical theorists, the latter challenging the epistemological, methodological, ontological and normative assumptions of neo-realism and neo-liberalism, and the former accusing critical theorists of having little of any substance to say about 'real-world' international relations. Since the end of the Cold War, these axes of debate have been displaced by two new debates: between rationalists and constructivists, and between constructivists and critical theorists. The catalyst for this shift was the rise of a new constructivist approach to international theory, an approach that challenged the rationalism and positivism of neo-realism and neoliberalism while simultaneously pushing critical theorists away from metatheoretical critique to the empirical analysis of world politics.

This chapter explains the nature and rise of constructivism in international theory, situating it in relation to both rationalist and critical theories. Constructivism is characterized by an emphasis on the importance of normative as well as material structures, on the role of identity in shaping political action and on the mutually constitutive relationship between agents and structures. When using the terms rationalism or rationalist theory, I refer not to the 'Grotian' or 'English' School of international theory, discussed by Andrew Linklater in Chapter 4 in this volume, but to theories that are explicitly informed by the assumptions of rational choice theory, principally neo-realism and neo-liberalism. I use the term 'critical theory' broadly to include all post-positivist theory of the Third Debate and after, encompassing both the narrowly defined critical theory of the Frankfurt School and postmodern international theory, discussed by Richard Devetak in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively. After revisiting the rationalist premises of neo-realism and neo-liberalism, and reviewing the broad-based critique of those premises

mounted by critical theorists during the 1980s, I examine the origins of constructivism and its principal theoretical premises. I then distinguish between three different forms of constructivist scholarship in International Relations: systemic, unit-level and holistic. This is followed by some reflections on the emergent discontents that characterize constructivism as a theoretical approach, by a discussion of the contribution of constructivism to international relations theory, and by a brief consideration of developments in constructivism in the last five years, particularly since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

Rationalist theory

After the Second World War, realism became the dominant theory of international relations. Yet this dominance did not go unchallenged, with new theoretical perspectives emerging, forcing revisions in realist theory. In the 1970s, the classical realism of Claude, Carr, Morgenthau, Niebuhr and others was challenged by liberals, such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, who emphasized interdependence between states, transnational relations and non-state actors, particularly multinational corporations (MNCs). International relations was not to be conceived as a system of 'colliding billiard balls', but as a cobweb of political, economic and social relations binding sub-national, national, transnational, international and supranational actors (Keohane and Nye 1972). This view was subsequently modified to pay greater attention to the role and importance of sovereign states, with Keohane and Nye reconceiving state power in the light of 'complex interdependence' (Keohane and Nye 1977). States were acknowledged to be the principal actors in world politics, but pervasive interdependence was thought to alter the nature and effectiveness of state power, with the balance of military power, so long emphasized by realists, no longer determining political outcomes, as sensitivity and vulnerability to interdependence produced new relations of power between states.

This challenge to realism did not go unanswered. As Jack Donnelly explains in Chapter 2 in this volume, in 1979 Kenneth Waltz published the *Theory of International Politics* (1979), in which he advanced a radically revised realist theory, subsequently labelled 'neo-realism' or 'structural realism'. Waltz drew on two sources of intellectual inspiration: the philosopher of science Imre Lakatos' model of theory construction, and microeconomic theory. The first led him to devise a theory with minimal assumptions, a parsimonious set of heuristically powerful propositions that could generate empirically verifiable hypotheses about international relations; the second encouraged him to emphasize the

structural determinants of state behaviour. The resulting neo-realist theory built on two assumptions: that the international system is anarchical, in the sense that it lacks a central authority to impose order; and that in such a system states are primarily interested in their own survival. Waltz went on to argue that to ensure their survival states must maximize their power, particularly their military power. Because such power is zero-sum – with an increase in the military power of one state necessarily producing a decrease in the relative power of another – Waltz argued that states are ‘defensive positionalists’. They are conscious of their position within the power hierarchy of states, and at a minimum seek to maintain that position, at a maximum to increase it to the point of domination. For this reason, Waltz claimed that the struggle for power is an enduring characteristic of international relations and conflict is endemic. In such a world, he argued, cooperation between states is at best precarious, at worst non-existent.

Theory of International Politics reinvigorated realism, giving realists a new identity – as neo- or structural realists – and a new confidence to the point of arrogance. Not all were convinced, though, and criticisms mounted on several fronts. The most moderate of these came from a new school of neo-liberal institutionalists, led by the repositioned Robert Keohane. Moving away from his previous concern with transnational relations and interdependence, Keohane took up the task of explaining cooperation under anarchy. Realists had long argued that if international cooperation was possible at all, it was only under conditions of hegemony, when a dominant state was able to use its power to create and enforce the institutional rules necessary to sustain cooperation between states. By the end of the 1970s, however, America’s relative power was clearly on the wane, yet the framework of institutions it had sponsored after the Second World War to facilitate international economic cooperation was not collapsing. How could this be explained? In his 1984 book, *After Hegemony*, Keohane proposed a neo-liberal theory of international cooperation, a theory that embraced three elements of neo-realism: the importance of international anarchy in shaping state behaviour, the state as the most important actor in world politics and the assumption of states as essentially self-interested. He also endorsed the Lakatosian model of theory construction that informed neo-realism (Keohane 1984, 1989a).

Despite this common ground with neo-realism, neo-liberalism draws very different conclusions about the potential for sustained international cooperation. As noted above, neo-liberals accept that states have to pursue their interests under conditions of anarchy. In Axelrod and Keohane’s words, anarchy ‘remains a constant’ (1993: 86). Nevertheless, anarchy alone does not determine the extent or nature of international

cooperation. Neo-realists are closest to the mark, neo-liberals argue, when there is low interdependence between states. When economic and political interactions between states are minimal, there are few common interests to spur international cooperation. When interdependence is high, however, as since the Second World War, states come to share a wide range of interests, from the management of international trade to global environmental protection. The existence of mutual interests is a prerequisite for international cooperation, but neo-liberals insist that the existence of such interests does not itself explain the extent and nature of cooperative relations between states – international cooperation remains difficult to achieve. Even when states have interests in common, the lack of a central world authority often deters them from incurring the reciprocal obligations that cooperation demands. Without a central authority, states fear that others will cheat on agreements; they can see cooperation as too costly, given the effort they would have to expend; and often they lack sufficient information to know that they even have common interests with other states. This not only explains why states fail to cooperate even when they have common interests, it explains how they cooperate when they do. According to neo-liberals, states construct international institutions, or regimes, to overcome these obstacles to cooperation. Defined as ‘sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge in a given area of international relations’, international regimes are said to raise the cost of cheating, lower transaction costs and increase information, thus facilitating cooperation under anarchy (Keohane 1984: 57, 85–109).

The debate between neo-realists and neo-liberals is often characterized as a debate between those who think that states are preoccupied with *relative* gains versus those who think that states are more interested in *absolute* gains. Because anarchy makes states fear for their survival, and because power is the ultimate guarantor of survival, neo-realists believe that states constantly measure their power against that of other states. They constantly monitor whether their position in the international power hierarchy is stable, declining, or on the rise, fearing decline above all else. This is why neo-realists are sceptical about international cooperation: if states are worried about relative gains, they will forgo cooperation if they fear that their gains will be less than those that accrue to others. Even if a trading agreement promises to net State A \$100 million in profit, if that same agreement will net State B \$200 million, State A may refuse to cooperate. In other words, the promise of absolute gains may not be sufficient to encourage states to cooperate, as they are primarily interested in relative gains. Neo-liberals deny that relative gains calculations pose such an obstacle to international cooperation.

The world imagined by neo-realists is too simplistic, they argue. States that are confident in their survival, which amounts to a significant proportion of states, are not as preoccupied with relative gains as neo-realists think; states tend to evaluate the intentions of other states as well as their relative capabilities; and when states have multiple relationships with multiple states the constant calculation of relative gains is simply impractical. Neo-liberals thus characterize states not as defensive positionalists, as neo-realists do, but as utility-maximizers, as actors that will entertain cooperation so long as it promises absolute gains in their interests.

In spite of these differences, neo-realism and neo-liberalism are both rationalist theories; they are both constructed upon the choice-theoretic assumptions of microeconomic theory. Three such assumptions stand out. First, political actors—be they individuals or states—are assumed to be atomistic, self-interested and rational. Actors are treated as *pre-social*, in the sense that their identities and interests are autogenous. In the language of classical liberalism, individuals are the source of their own conceptions of the good. Actors are also *self-interested*, concerned primarily with the pursuit of their own interests. And they are *rational*, capable of establishing the most effective and efficient way to realize their interests within the environmental constraints they encounter. Second, and following from the above, actors' interests are assumed to be exogenous to social interaction. Individuals and states are thought to enter social relations with their interests already formed. Social interaction is not considered an important determinant of interests. Third, and following yet again from the above, society is understood as a strategic realm, a realm in which individuals or states come together to pursue their pre-defined interests. Actors are not, therefore, inherently social; they are not products of their social environment, merely atomistic rational beings that form social relations to maximize their interests.

These assumptions are most starkly expressed in neo-realism. As we have seen, states are defined as 'defensive positionalists', jealous guardians of their positions in the international power hierarchy. The formation of state interests is of no interest to neo-realists. Beyond maintaining that international anarchy gives states a survival motive, and that over time the incentives and constraints of the international system socialize states into certain forms of behaviour, they have no theory of interest formation, nor do they think they should have (Waltz 1979: 91–2, 127–8). Furthermore, international relations are considered so thoroughly strategic that neo-realists deny the existence of a society of states altogether, speaking of an 'international system' not an international society. How does neo-liberalism compare? The assumption of self-interest is expressed in the neo-liberal idea of states as rational

egoists: actors who are concerned primarily with their own narrowly defined interests, and who pursue those interests in the most efficacious manner possible. Like neo-realists, neo-liberals treat state interests as exogenous to inter-state interaction, and see no need for a theory of interest formation. In fact, explaining the origins of state interests is explicitly excluded from the province of neo-liberal theory. Finally, neo-liberals move beyond the stark systemic imagery of neo-realism to acknowledge the existence of an international society, but their conception of that society remains strategic. States certainly come together in the cooperative construction and maintenance of functional institutions, but their identities and interests are not shaped or constituted in any way by their social interactions.

The challenge of critical theory

While neo-realists and neo-liberals engaged in a rationalist family feud, critical theorists challenged the very foundations of the rationalist project. Ontologically, they criticized the image of social actors as atomistic egoists, whose interests are formed prior to social interaction, and who enter social relations solely for strategic purposes. They argued, in contrast, that actors are inherently *social*, that their identities and interests are socially constructed, the products of inter-subjective social structures. Epistemologically and methodologically, they questioned the neo-positivism of Lakatosian forms of social science, calling for interpretive modes of understanding, attuned to the unquantifiable nature of many social phenomena and the inherent subjectivity of all observation. And normatively, they condemned the notion of value-neutral theorizing, arguing that all knowledge is wedded to interests, and that theories should be explicitly committed to exposing and dismantling structures of domination and oppression (Hoffman 1987; George and Campbell 1990).

Beneath the umbrella of this broad critique, modern and postmodern critical theorists stood united against the dominant rationalist theories. Just as the rationalists were internally divided, though, so too were the critics. The postmodernists, drawing on the French social theorists, particularly Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, adopted a stance of 'radical interpretivism'. They opposed all attempts to assess empirical and ethical claims by any single criterion of validity, claiming that such moves always marginalize alternative viewpoints and moral positions, creating hierarchies of power and domination. The modernists, inspired by the writings of Frankfurt School theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, assumed a position of 'critical interpretivism'. They recognized the contingent nature of all knowledge – the inherent subjectivity of all claims

and the connection between knowledge and power – but they insisted that some criteria were needed to distinguish plausible from implausible knowledge claims, and that without minimal, consensually grounded ethical principles, emancipatory political action would be impossible. Mark Hoffman has characterized this difference between modernists and postmodernists in terms of a distinction between ‘anti-foundationalism’ and ‘minimal foundationalism’ (1991: 169–85).

Despite these important differences, the first wave of critical theory had a distinctive meta-theoretical or quasi-philosophical character. Critical international theorists roamed broadly over epistemological, normative, ontological and methodological concerns, and their energies were devoted primarily to demolishing the philosophical foundations of the rationalist project. Noteworthy empirical studies of world politics were certainly published by critical theorists, but the general tenor of critical writings was more abstractly theoretical, and their principal impact lay in the critique of prevailing assumptions about legitimate knowledge, about the nature of the social world, and about the purpose of theory (Cox 1987; Der Derian 1987). This general orientation was encouraged by a widely shared assumption among critical theorists about the relationship between theory and practice. This assumption was evident in the common refrain that realism constituted a ‘hegemonic discourse’, by which they meant two things. First, that realist assumptions, particularly dressed up in the garb of rationalism and neo-positivism, as was neo-realism, defined what counts as legitimate knowledge in the field of International Relations. And, second, that the influence of these assumptions extended far beyond the academy to structure policy making, particularly in the United States. Rationalist theories were thus doubly insidious. Not only did they dominate the discourse of International Relations, to the exclusion of alternative perspectives and forms of knowledge, they informed Washington’s Cold War politics, with all the excesses of power these engendered. From this standpoint, theory was seen as having a symbiotic relationship with practice, and critiquing the discourse of International Relations was considered the essence of substantive analysis (Price and Reus-Smit 1998).

Constructivism

The end of the Cold War produced a major reconfiguration of debates within the dominant American discourse of international relations theory, prompted by the rise of a new ‘constructivist’ school of thought. While constructivism owes much to intellectual developments in sociology—particularly sociological institutionalism (see Finnemore 1996) – Richard

Price and Chris Reus-Smit have argued that constructivism should be seen primarily as an outgrowth of critical international theory, as many of its pioneers explicitly sought to employ the insights of that theory to illuminate diverse aspects of world politics. Constructivism differs from first-wave critical theory, however, in its emphasis on *empirical analysis*. Some constructivists have continued to work at the meta-theoretical level (Onuf 1989; Wendt 1999), but most have sought conceptual and theoretical illumination through the systematic analysis of empirical puzzles in world politics. The balance of critical scholarship has thus shifted away from the previous mode of abstract philosophical argument toward the study of human discourse and practice beyond the narrow confines of international relations theory. Where first-wave critical theorists had rejected the rationalist depiction of humans as atomistic egoists and society as a strategic domain – proffering an alternative image of humans as socially embedded, communicatively constituted and culturally empowered – constructivists have used this alternative ontology to explain and interpret aspects of world politics that were anomalous to neo-realism and neo-liberalism. And where earlier theorists had condemned the neo-positivist methodology of those perspectives, calling for more interpretive, discursive and historical modes of analysis, constructivists have employed these techniques to further their empirical explorations.

The rise of constructivism was prompted by four factors. First, motivated by an attempt to reassert the pre-eminence of their own conceptions of theory and world politics, leading rationalists challenged critical theorists to move beyond theoretical critique to the substantive analysis of international relations. While prominent critical theorists condemned the motives behind this challenge, constructivists saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate the heuristic power of non-rationalist perspectives (Walker 1989). Second, the end of the Cold War undermined the explanatory pretensions of neo-realists and neo-liberals, neither of which had predicted, nor could adequately comprehend, the systemic transformations reshaping the global order. It also undermined the critical theorists' assumption that theory drove practice in any narrow or direct fashion, as global politics increasingly demonstrated dynamics that contradicted realist expectations and prescriptions. The end of the Cold War thus opened a space for alternative explanatory perspectives and prompted critically inclined scholars to move away from a narrowly defined meta-theoretical critique. Third, by the beginning of the 1990s a new generation of young scholars had emerged who embraced many of the propositions of critical international theory, but who saw potential for innovation in conceptual elaboration and empirically informed theoretical development (Klotz 1995: 20;

Kier 1997; Price 1997; Hall 1999; Lynch 1999; Reus-Smit 1999; Tannenwald 1999; Rae 2002). Not only had the end of the Cold War thrown up new and interesting questions about world politics (such as the dynamics of international change, the nature of basic institutional practices, the role of non-state agency and the problem of human rights), the rationalist failure to explain recent systemic transformations encouraged this new generation of scholars to revisit old questions and issues so long viewed through neo-realist and neo-liberal lenses (including the control of WMD, the role and nature of strategic culture and the implications of anarchy). Finally, the advance of the new constructivist perspective was aided by the enthusiasm that mainstream scholars, frustrated by the analytical failings of the dominant rationalist theories, showed in embracing the new perspective, moving it from the margins to the mainstream of theoretical debate.

Echoing the divisions within critical international theory, constructivists are divided between modernists and postmodernists. They have all, however, sought to articulate and explore three core ontological propositions about social life, propositions which they claim illuminate more about world politics than rival rationalist assumptions. First, to the extent that structures can be said to shape the behaviour of social and political actors, be they individuals or states, constructivists hold that *normative* or *ideational* structures are just as important as material structures. Where neo-realists emphasize the material structure of the balance of military power, and Marxists stress the material structure of the capitalist world economy, constructivists argue that systems of shared ideas, beliefs and values also have structural characteristics, and that they exert a powerful influence on social and political action. There are two reasons why they attach such importance to these structures. Constructivists argue that 'material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded' (Wendt 1995: 73). For example, Canada and Cuba both exist alongside the United States, yet the simple balance of military power cannot explain the fact that the former is a close American ally, the latter a sworn enemy. Ideas about identity, the logics of ideology and established structures of friendship and enmity lend the material balance of power between Canada and the United States and Cuba and the United States radically different meanings. Constructivists also stress the importance of normative and ideational structures because these are thought to shape the social identities of political actors. Just as the institutionalized norms of the academy shape the identity of a professor, the norms of the international system condition the social identity of the sovereign state. For instance, in the age of Absolutism (1555–1848) the norms of European international society held that Christian monarchies

were the only legitimate form of sovereign state, and these norms, backed by the coercive practices of the community of states, conspired to undermine Muslim, liberal or nationalist polities.

Second, constructivists argue that understanding how non-material structures condition actors' identities is important because identities inform interests and, in turn, actions. As we saw above, rationalists believe that actors' interests are exogenously determined, meaning that actors, be they individuals or states, encounter one another with a pre-existing set of preferences. Neo-realists and neo-liberals are not interested in where such preferences come from, only in how actors pursue them strategically. Society – both domestic and international – is thus considered a *strategic domain*, a place in which previously constituted actors pursue their goals, a place that does not alter the nature or interests of those actors in any deep sense. Constructivists, in contrast, argue that understanding how actors develop their interests is crucial to explaining a wide range of international political phenomenon that rationalists ignore or misunderstand. To explain interest formation, constructivists focus on the social identities of individuals or states. In Alexander Wendt's words, 'Identities are the basis of interests' (Wendt 1992: 398). To return to the previous examples, being an 'academic' gives a person certain interests, such as research and publication, and being a Christian monarch in the age of Absolutism brought with it a range of interests, such as controlling religion within your territory pursuing rights of succession beyond that territory and crushing nationalist movements. Likewise, being a liberal democracy today encourages an intolerance of authoritarian regimes and a preference for free-market capitalism.

Third, constructivists contend that agents and structures are *mutually constituted*. Normative and ideational structures may well condition the identities and interests of actors, but those structures would not exist if it were not for the knowledgeable practices of those actors. Wendt's emphasis on the 'supervening' power of structures, and the predilection of many constructivists to study how norms shape behaviour, suggest that constructivists are structuralists, just like their neo-realist and Marxist counterparts. On closer reflection, however, one sees that constructivists are better classed as structurationists, as emphasizing the impact of non-material structures on identities and interests but, just as importantly, the role of practices in maintaining and transforming those structures. Institutionalized norms and ideas 'define the meaning and identity of the individual actor and the patterns of appropriate economic, political, and cultural activity engaged in by those individuals' (Boli, Meyer and Thomas 1989: 12), and it 'is through reciprocal interaction that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social

structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests' (Wendt 1992: 406). The norms of the academy give certain individuals an academic identity which brings with it an interest in research and publication, but it is only through the routinized practices of academics that such norms exist and are sustained. Similarly, the international norms that uphold liberal democracy as the dominant model of legitimate statehood, and which license intervention in the name of human rights and the promotion of free trade, exist and persist only because of the continued practices of liberal democratic states (and powerful non-state actors).

Normative and ideational structures are seen as shaping actors' identities and interests through three mechanisms: imagination, communication and constraint. With regard to the first of these, constructivists argue that non-material structures affect what actors see as the realm of possibility: how they think they should act, what the perceived limitations on their actions are and what strategies they can imagine, let alone entertain, to achieve their objectives. Institutionalized norms and ideas thus condition what actors consider necessary and possible, in both practical and ethical terms. A president or prime minister in an established liberal democracy will only imagine and seriously entertain certain strategies to enhance his or her power, and the norms of the liberal democratic polity will condition his or her expectations. Normative and ideational structures also work their influence through communication. When an individual or a state seeks to justify their behaviour, they will usually appeal to established norms of legitimate conduct. A president or prime minister may appeal to the conventions of executive government, and a state may justify its behaviour with reference to the norms of sovereignty—or, in the case of intervention in the affairs of another state, according to international human rights norms. As the latter case suggests, norms may conflict with one another in their prescriptions, which makes moral argument about the relative importance of international normative precepts a particularly salient aspect of world politics (Risse 2000). Finally, even if normative and ideational structures do not affect an actor's behaviour by framing their imagination or by providing a linguistic or moral court of appeal, constructivists argue that they can place significant constraints on that actor's conduct. Realists have long argued that ideas simply function as rationalizations, as ways of masking actions really motivated by the crude desire for power. Constructivists point out, though, that institutionalized norms and ideas work as rationalizations only because they already have moral force in a given social context. Furthermore, appealing to established norms and ideas to justify behaviour is a viable strategy only if the behaviour is in some measure consistent with the proclaimed principles.

The very language of justification thus provides constraints on action, though the effectiveness of such constraints will vary with the actor and the context (Reus-Smit 1999: 35–6).

Given the preceding discussion, constructivism contrasts with rationalism in three important respects. First, where rationalists assume that actors are atomistic egoists, constructivists treat them as deeply *social*: not in the sense that they are ‘party animals’, but in the sense that their identities are constituted by the institutionalized norms, values and ideas of the social environment in which they act. Second, instead of treating actors’ interests as exogenously determined, as given prior to social interaction, constructivists treat interests as *endogenous* to such interaction, as a consequence of identity acquisition, as learned through processes of communication, reflection on experience and role enactment. Third, while rationalists view society as a strategic realm, a place where actors rationally pursue their interests, constructivists see it as a *constitutive realm*, the site that generates actors as knowledgeable social and political agents, the realm that makes them who they are. From these ontological commitments, it is clear why constructivists are called ‘constructivists’, for they emphasize the social determinants of social and political agency and action.

In the 1990s, three different forms of constructivism evolved: systemic, unit-level and holistic constructivism. The first of these follows neo-realists in adopting a ‘third-image’ perspective, focusing solely on interactions between unitary state actors. Everything that exists or occurs within the domestic political realm is ignored, and an account of world politics is derived simply by theorizing how states relate to one another in the external, international domain. Wendt’s influential writings provide the best example of systemic constructivism. In fact, one could reasonably argue that Wendt’s writings represent the only true example of this rarified form of constructivism (Wendt 1992, 1994, 1995, 1999). Like other constructivists, Wendt believes that the identity of the state informs its interests and, in turn, its actions. He draws a distinction, though, between the social and corporate identities of the state: the former referring to the status, role or personality that international society ascribes to a state; the latter referring to the internal human, material, ideological, or cultural factors that make a state what it is. Because of his commitment to systemic theorizing, Wendt brackets corporate sources of state identity, concentrating on how structural contexts, systemic processes, and strategic practices produce and reproduce different sorts of state identity. Though theoretically elegant, this form of constructivism suffers from one major deficiency: it confines the processes that shape international societies within an unnecessarily and unproductively narrow realm. The social identities of states are thought