

Analysing constructivism in international relations theory politics essay



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With its opposite position to mainstream International Relations (IR) theorists', rationalist or positivist (neo-realism and neo-liberalism), explanations to international politics, constructivism could be perceived as the development of group of critical theories that contested the way in which IR should search for knowledge in 1980s, the period Yusuf Lapid (1989) describes as " the Third Debate". Although scholars who subsume to constructivist idea acknowledged this point, they argue that constructivist ideas toward IR are not exactly the same with its predecessor. The like such as Ted Hof (1998) and Christian Reus-Smit (2001) point out that constructivism is focus on the way in decoding the international social phenomenon through empirical analysis as well as normative approach. It also emphasize on the role of identity in determining agent's behaviour and the mutually constituted between agents and structures. These concepts are not fit in to the mindset of critical theories, which tend to employ different aspects of social exchanges as a unit of study in trying to understand the nature of international politics.

Having asserted that constructivism is neither rationalism nor critical theories, this essay aims to explore the uniqueness of the particular theory and its prominence in IR in the globalization stage, where the explanatory power of, the dominant, realism seems to be less tenable. This essay is divided into three parts: firstly, exploring premised concept of constructivism; secondly, giving empirical observation regarding the North-South relations through constructivist view; lastly, wrap up the study and assess the promise of the theory as one of the key approaches in the field of IR.

What is constructivism?

The rise of constructivism after the end of the Cold War not only contest the limited account of rationalism, both neo-realism and neo-liberalism, in explaining the changing order in global politics but also, at the same time, put forward critical theories beyond its territory by subsuming to the normative and empirical analysis. Rationalists, both neo-realists and neo-liberalists, share the same premise toward the structure of IR and how states response to it. As a result of Lakotos' theory construction model and microeconomic theory, they have a common view that states are self-interested and rational agent within the anarchic international system, states perceive IR as a venue for maximizing their interests, thus, the way states act is subject to the power they get from the distribution of material power within the system, this also lead to hierarchy in IR (Reus-Smit, 2001). On the other hand, critical theories which might not pay much attention on the structure of IR, they are more interested in meta-theoretical debate which rationalism. They oppose the epistemology and ontology that are postulated by rationalism, which lead to their rejection of using normative or universalist approach in studying the discipline. This part of essay is going to differentiate premise ideas of constructivism with the other two branches of thought.

Ted Hof (1998) highlights that the key premised concept of constructivism is an intersubjective set of meanings, a shared meaning in a society, which can be in a form of social norms or social practices. According to Hof (ibid), intersubjective set of meanings plays a vital role in formulating, another important focus of constructivism, state's identity. Social norms are the <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-constructivism-in-international-relations-theory-politics-essay/>

foundations that influence state's behaviour and that behaviour creates interactions with others who, through the reproduction process, will recognize this behaviour as state's identity. Whereas realism emphasizes on distribution of material capabilities in the anarchic system of IR, constructivism views that normative structures are of importance as well as material capabilities. As having asserted by Reus-Smit (2001), normative structures are the thought to shape the social identity of political actor. The norms that determine actors' identity can go in parallel between International practices and internal elements. Having focused on how normative structures shape actor's identity, constructivism provides an account for the development of interests as well as actor's perception toward others. According to Alexander Wendt, the prominent constructivist scholar, "identity is the basis of interests" (1992: quoted in Reus-Smit, *ibid*), constructivist scholars hold that by having examined the connection between identity and interests, it is possible to provide room for understanding why each actor sometimes views the same situation differently.

Having held intersubjective set of meanings as a basic concept for examining IR, constructivists can generate normative account to define state's behaviour as well as state's identity that can be deployed as their framework for other issues in IR domain such as state and international structure as well as power and interests. In this sense, constructivism holds that states as agents and IR as a system are mutually constituted each other. On contrary to rationalists, constructivists such as Hof (1998), Hobson and Sharman (2005) try to decode the puzzle of IR by suggesting that states, with their

sovereignty, and the anarchic international system are both imaginary, which are meaningless without set of shared norms and values supporting them. To this extent, constructivists argue that states and anarchic structure are social constructed and their meanings are dependent on one another. The analysis of constructivism holds on the institutionalized norms and practices that maintain and transform the relations between agents and structure. According to Boli, Meyer, and Thomas (1989: quoted in Reu-Smit, 2001), the meaning and identity of the actors and the patterns of appropriate activities engaged in by those actors are defined by shared norms and ideas through reciprocal interactions that have been created and instantiated the relatively enduring social structures in way the identity and interests have been defined. In other words, for constructivism, states and IR or agent and structure are mutually constituted via the process of reproduction of social exchanges of intersubjective set of meanings or, according to Adler (1997), a shared knowledge.

In order to explain the process that maintains the reproduction of norms, constructivism argues points out that there are three mechanisms for the task: imagination, communication and constraint. Firstly, imagination refers to a shared knowledge that was considered necessary and possible in practical and ethical term by actors. Secondly, communication, which could be the most influential part of the reproduction process, explains process that actors interact when they create certain norms or rules to legitimate their actions. These norms and rules might possibly contrast with one another subject to the perception of actor who established them. Lastly, according to constructivism, set of shared knowledge does not frame the

idea or give moral court of appeal to actors rather shared knowledge as a commonsense constraint actor not to behave unorthodoxy (Reus-Smit, 2001). In this sense, it could be argued that the reproduction process of shared knowledge is based on the set of imaginary norms that have been constructed through communication process to justify certain actions of actors. The way in which shared knowledge works is to constraint actors' behaviour with moral or social expectation not to shape their idea.

As mentioned that constructivism is about intersubjective set of meanings or a set of shared knowledge, norms, practices, or values, it provides an account to analyze power in a different angle from realism, liberalism and Marxism. Whereas those theories mentioned focus on material power either in sense of military power or economic power, constructivism open a space for examine discursive power, the power of identity and norms that can shape as well as constraint states' behaviour. According to Emanuel Adler (1997), as social reality is an outcome of imposing meanings and functions on physical reality, power could be understood as the authority to determine the shared meaning that embody the identities, interests, institutional power to include and exclude, to legitimize and authorize. Although constructivism main focuses is discursive power not material power, Adler (ibid) also points out that in order to make others to accept or internalize the norms that was created material power could be necessary. Therefore, the concept of power in a view of constructivism could be put in the way that combines together the significant of discursive and material power together.

Constructivist scholars such as Hobson and Sharman (2005) assert that

under this constructed international anarchy, there is hierarchy going on.

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They hold that hierarchy in international system is a relationship between actors whereby one is entailed to command and the other is obligated to be under control, and this interaction is considered as right and legitimate by each. This argument contrasted with the fact that since 1648, according to the treaty of Westphalia, the concept of sovereign state, which, ideally, makes all states, have equal right over its own territory, was implemented. According to Siba Grovogui (2002), the idea of sovereign states was derived from the decision of western powers at that time to restore peace in Europe. It, without consent, was imported to other political entities in other parts of the world. As argued that western powers agreed to let the Westphalia system alive to serve a purpose of restoring peace in Europe, Grovogui (ibid) suggests that sovereignty which become a commonsense to all statesmen in formulating their thought about IR is in fact a way in which major powers exercise their discursive capabilities to shape the world that fit with their interests. This leads to the same assumption with Hobson and Sharman that there is an uneven status of states in anarchic system.

Having argued that under the anarchic brutally and lawless international system there are a certain forms of hierarchy, Hobson and Sharman (2005) deploy the framework of constructivism to point out the importance of norms and identity in contributing to the forms of hierarchical relations within this anarchic international society. They examine the rationale of the western power in colonizing other entities in various part of the world. It is clear for them that the idea of imperial hierarchies in the 18th and 19th centuries was not about material power only rather it involved the social norms in European states at the time. They suggest that European at that time was

overwhelmed by the ideas of racial supremacy. Therefore, for Britain the quest of colonizing countries other than European continent was thing they should do as a “ moral vocation” to liberate those barbaric countries from their own cultures. Also, major powers in each period of history, they all have advantages in their military or economy which lead to the representation of their identity as major powers that capable to abuse the system of anarchy. This kind of identity generate from the more advanced states also works in a diverse way as it will draw weaker states to fall to the will of stronger states in order to maximize their security or to protect their interests (Adler, 1997) To this end, constructivism accepts the constructed sovereign states as well as an anarchic system but they also points out the concept of sovereignty could be a norm that was invented by major powers to legitimize their actions in seeking for their interests, and the fact that underneath the anarchic surface, IR always have hierarchic system within.

The North-South relations

As discussed in the earlier part that the key premises of constructivism are intersubjective set of meanings, Imaginary norms whose meaning was given through communication among actors in order to legitimize certain actions, and its existence has influent over the behaviour of states. This part will deploy that idea to examine the relations between developed and developing world and to illustrate that there are an uneven structure within IR.

Major powers initiated the rule of the game either sovereign states or NATO, with their material and discursive powers weaker states fall for the game.

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Once they fall for the game they need to adapt itself according to the rule which is a shared norm in the society. To this end, there are attempt to discuss about universal human right values and humanitarian intervention. s

Interests, hierarchy, identity, power.

The existence of both states and international structure is, in fact, mutually constitute

Hof (1998) argues that constructivism which focuses on discursive capabilities such as norms and practices, perceive the anarchic international system as an imagination, which is meaningless without set of norms and practices. To this extent, constructivists (

With respect to the concept of intersubjective social context, Hof (1998) argues that the Following to this point, an account of constructivism articulates the nature of states and IR as mutually constitute each other, with