

A critical analysis of the constructivism method politics essay



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This essay attempts to provide an overview of constructivism in international relations theory; traces back its origins through writings of some scholars , particularly Alexander Wendt . It sheds light on prominence of constructivism as a challenger to the mainstream international relations.

It first lays out the basic tenets of constructivism and examines their implications on opening new substantive areas to inquiry, such as the roles of gender and ethnicity, which have been largely absent from international relations approaches. Having defined some of the core features of constructivism as an approach, the article examines constructivism as theory . This will be conducted through applying theory functions on constructivism.

In addition , the essay shows some of the critiques of constructivism from realist and post-positivist point views. Finally . It concludes with the fact that constructivism is not independent and full-fledged theory but a theoretically informed approach to the study of global politics.

Key words: constructivism, ideas, identity, norms, culture, beliefs, social construction anarchy.

Constructivism provides a good method, but a poor theory. Discuss.

Until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the debate between Neo-realism and Neo-liberalism has dominated the discipline of International Relations; materialism was the building blocks of mainstream international theory. For neo-realists, the principal determinant of state behaviour is the distribution of military capabilities among states, consequently anarchy and the distribution of relative power drive most of what goes on in world politics.

(Copeland 2000: 187) . Neo-liberals also saw state interests as essentially material, even if they did posit the importance of international institutions as intervening variables.(Rues-Smit 2001: 224). Thus, societal analysis in international relations scholarship has been marginalised.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the writings of Alexander Wendt (1987, 1992), Friedrich Kratochwil (1989) and Nicholas Onuf (1989) established constructivist ideas, a genuinely radical alternative to conventional IR.

Although a relatively new approach to IR, constructivism has returned international scholars to the foundational questions, including the nature of the state and the concepts of sovereignty and citizenship. In addition, constructivism has opened new substantive areas to inquiry, such as the roles of gender and ethnicity, which have been largely absent from international relations approaches. (Mingst 2004: 74)

By reimagining the social as a constitutive realm of values and practices, and by situating individual identities within such a field, constructivists have placed sociological inquiry back at the centre of the discipline. Aided by the momentous changes that attended the end of the Cold War, and also by the ongoing process of globalization, the constructivists interest in the particularities of culture, identity, interest and experience created space for renaissance in the study of history and world politics. .(Rues-Smit 2001: 226)

Constructivism as an approach

" Constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life" (Ruggie 1998). Constructivists focus on the role of ideas, norms, knowledge, culture, and argument in politics, stressing in particular the role of collectively held or " intersubjective" ideas and understandings on social life. Specifically, constructivism is an approach to social analysis that asserts the following: (1) human interaction is shaped primarily by ideational factors, not simply material ones; (2) the most important ideational factors are widely shared or " intersubjective" beliefs, which are not reducible to individuals; and (3) these shared beliefs construct the interests and identities of purposive actors (Adler 1997, Price & Reus-Smit 1998, Ruggie 1998, Wendt 1999).

The core observation in constructivism is 'the social construction of reality. This has a number of related elements. One is to emphasize the socially constructed nature of actors and their identities and interests. Instead of assuming that actors are born outside of and prior to society, the claim is that individuals are produced and created by their cultural environment. Nurture not nature. (Branett 2001 : 259).

In an of-repeated phrase, Alexander Wendt captured the methodological core of IR constructivism: 'anarchy is what states make of it'. There is no objective international world apart from the practices and institutions that states arrange among themselves. In making that statement , Wendt argues that a self-help anarchy is not some kind of external given which dictates a logic of analysis based on realism: 'self-help and power politics are institutions , not essential features of anarchy'(Wendt 1992: 395) ,(Jackson & Sorensen 1999: 239)

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Alexander Wendt argues that political structure, whether one of anarchy or particular distribution of material capabilities, explain nothing. It tells us little about state behaviour :'' It does not predict whether two states will be friend or foes, will recognize each other's sovereignty , will have dynastic ties, will have revisionist or status quo powers, and so on. (Wendt 1992: 395) . 'What we need to know is identity, and identities change as a result of cooperative behaviour and learning. Whether the system is anarchic depends on the distribution of identities, not the distribution of military capabilities, as the realist would have us believe. If a state identifies with itself, then the system may be anarchic. If a state identifies with other states, then there is no anarchy (. (Mingst 2004: 75)

A security dilemma , for example , is not merely made up of the fact that two sovereign states possess nuclear weapons. It also depends on how those states view each other; that view is based on shared knowledge. ,(Jackson & Sorensen1999: 238)

In a constructivist analysis, agents and structures are mutually constituted; structures not only constrain actors, they also shape the identities and the interests of them. Thus structures are also defined by ideas, norms, and rules; in other words, structures contain normative and material elements. The challenge, therefore, is to recognize that the normative structure can create agents and that agents can create and possibly transform those structures. (Branett 2001 : 255).

According to Alder , constructivism's importance and its added value for the study of international relations lie mainly in its emphasis on the ontological

reality of intersubjective knowledge and on the epistemological and methodological implications of this reality. (Alder1997: 322) .

Additionally , power can be understood not only as the ability of one actor to do what they would not do otherwise , but also as the production of identities and interests that limit the ability to control their life. In sum , the meanings that actors bring to their activities are shaped by the underlying culture, and meanings are not always fixed but are a central feature of politics.

Constructivism as a theory

However, despite of the intellectual vigour that constructivism has fostered, this approach has been criticized.

John Mersheimer complains that constructivists put too much emphasis on subjective ideas & knowledge: realists believe that the state behaviour is largely shaped by the material structure of the international system. The distribution of material capabilities among states is the key factor for understanding world politics. This means that everything is not uncertain or in flux, says Mersheimer, because the material structure is an objective reality and is not merely 'intersubjective'. (Mearsheimer 1995a: 91-92).

Although constructivism is deeply concerned with radically changing state behaviour, it says little about how change comes about. It does not tell us why particular discourses become dominant, and others fall by the wayside. And when constructivism tries to point out particular factors that lead to changes in discourse, often argues that material changes drive changes in

discourse. So discourse is not determinative, but a reflective of developments in objective world..(Mearsheimer 1995b : 42).

In addition, neo-realists are sceptical about the importance that constructivists attach to norms, in particular international norms. Such norms surely exist, but they are routinely disregarded if that is in the interest of powerful states.(Jackson 2006). Moreover, there is no international consensus concerning norms of behaviour in the international system, primary of which is justice and human rights.

At the same time, neo-realists are not ready to accept that states can easily become friends due to their social interaction. Such a goal may be 'desirable in principle, but not realizable in practice, because the structure of the international system forces states to behave as egoists. Anarchy, offensive capabilities, and uncertain intentions combine to leave states with little choice but to compete aggressively with each other. For realists, trying to infuse states with communitarian norms is a hopeless cause' (Mearsheimer 1995b: 367).

From the post-positivist side, Steve Smith argues that the constructivist view of how ideas and shared knowledge shape the way the actors see themselves in world politics is not sufficiently profound. Furthermore, the constructivist agenda is a rather traditional one, focusing on the interaction of states . There is no place for structure such as capitalism or patriarchy'. (Smith 1997: 186)

Finally, if, as constructivists claim, there is no objective reality . if " the world is in the eye of the beholder" , then there can be no right or wrong answers , <https://assignbuster.com/a-critical-analysis-of-the-constructivism-method-politics-essay/>

only individual perspectives. With no authoritative texts, all texts are equally valid - both the musings of the elite and the practices of everyday men and women. (Mingst 20004: 76)

Is it a theory?

A theory is based upon a hypothesis and backed by evidence; it presents a concept or idea that is testable. In science, a theory is not merely a guess. A theory is a fact-based framework for describing a phenomenon. In social sciences, theories are used to provide a model for understanding human thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. A social theory has two key components: (1) it must describe behaviour and (2) make predictions about future behaviours.

To evaluate a theory, we must verify many conditions:

1- Generalizability: applicability to many times, places, and issues.

2-Empirical validity: accuracy of predictions.

3-Progression: whether it expands to new predictions or degenerates by excessive modification.

If we apply these conditions to constructivism, we will find that constructivism is neither specific enough to be testable, nor parsimonious. And it is unclear what factors are cause nor which are effect. It does not prize deductive methods of theory-construction and does not seek to 'uncover' causalities. (Ruggie, 1998, 52)

Constructivism is a different kind of theory from realism, liberalism, or Marxism and operates at a different level of abstraction. Constructivism is not a substantive theory of politics. It is a social theory that makes claims about the nature of social life and social change; consequently it does not, by itself, produce specific predictions about political outcomes that one could test in social science research. (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001: 393)

As such, it is much more and much less than meets the eye. It is much less because it is not properly a theory that can be viewed as a rival to already existing theories. It offers no predictions about enduring regularities or tendencies in world politics. Instead, it suggests how to investigate them. Consequently, it is much more than meets the eye because it offers alternative ways of thinking about a range of issues. (Branett 2001 : 268)

However, the debate about basic theory is of course relevant for the constructivist ambition of demonstrating that 'ideas matter'. How exactly is it that ideas matter? Do changes in ideas always come before changes in material conditions? Do ideas guide policy or are they justifications for policy? Should ideas be seen as causes of behaviour in IR or should they rather be seen as constitutive elements that define what IR is all about? Further clarification in these areas is of vital importance for the constructivist research programme. (Jackson 2006).

Drawing on what mentioned above, there is scepticism about constructivism . whether it is properly to be seen as a theory of IR theory or as a philosophical category, a meta-theory or a method for empirical research, or whether it is indeed an approach relevant at several levels.

(Zehfuss 2002: 9) . In conclusion, constructivism is not independent and full-fledged theory but a theoretically informed approach to the study of global politics.

Conclusion

Constructivism challenged the discipline's mainstream on its own terms and on issues that were at the heart of its research agenda. (Branett 2001: 268) However, the rise of Constructivism has had several important impacts on the development of international relations theory and analysis; the social, historical, and normative have returned to the centre stage of debate, especially the American core of the discipline. . (Rues-Smit 2001: 225)

Constructivism's core assumptions have shaped its empirical research program in several important ways. They have shaped the kinds of questions constructivists tend to ask by opening up for inquiry issues that other approaches had failed to engage. Understanding the constitution of things is essential in explaining how they behave and what causes political outcomes. Just as understanding how the double-helix DNA molecule is constituted materially enables understandings of genetics and disease, so, too, an understanding of how sovereignty, human rights, laws of war, or bureaucracies are constituted socially allows us to hypothesize about their effects in world politics. (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001: 394).

Their claim deserves attention in a world where inflamed passions lead to bloodshed in the name of neither conquest nor class, but instead simply because of who the enemy is: a Muslim, a Serb, a Tutsi, a Hutu, a Catholic, a Protestant, an Arab, or a Jew. Realism and liberalism are not incapable of <https://assignbuster.com/a-critical-analysis-of-the-constructivism-method-politics-essay/>

explaining hatred, but they struggle to account for such widespread violence that serves neither Mammon nor the national interest. (Kowert, Paul 2001).

Finally , Constructivism has become a phenomenon in IR not merely because many scholars adopted it , but because a lot of scholars debated and are still debating it .