

CHAPTER 9

Constructivism

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Constructivism is a central approach to understanding international relations (IR), International Organizations (IOs), and global governance. Emerging as a theoretical contender in the late 1980s,

constructivist approaches seek to identify how and when ideas matter for shaping international politics. As this chapter outlines, constructivism flourished alongside more radical critical theories to challenge narrow IR debates over how to make the analysis of events occurring in world politics more scientific. While there are distinctions among constructivists over the scientific endeavor,¹ the major thrust of constructivism was to challenge the dominance of rational theories of IR such as neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism.

Constructivists embraced the position that everything in the world is socially constructed and that many things taken as given are instead “social facts” created by shared agreement among state and non-state actors alike. Institutions such as money and gross domestic product (GDP), what constitutes a failed state, and the very nature of state sovereignty and the international system, are social constructs that endure because state and non-state actors are willing to accept them as given and act in accordance with them. Norms that states currently take for granted include: sovereignty, anti-slavery, anti-apartheid, the chemical weapons taboo; opposing wartime plunder and piracy; opposing the use of mercenaries; opposing drug

trafficking and the trade in endangered species; and prohibiting torture, among others. This approach radically challenged rational theories that assume that many of these structures were immutable and unchanging.

This chapter outlines the emergence and basic tenets of constructivist thought before detailing current debates over how and when ideas matter. A constructivist perspective, based on norms, culture, and identity counterposes rationalist theoretical accounts of change within IR. The original point of contention was to identify when ideas rather than material factors shaped international politics. Early scholars examined the importance of norms, which are collective expectations about proper behavior for actors with a given identity for influencing the international system, absent material factors. Ideas can shape international politics both as regulative norms and constitutive ones. Regulative norms lead to norm-following behavior such as agreeing to adhere to UN treaties and protocols or to act in accordance with how the World Bank classifies states as developed or developing. In order to demonstrate that norms led to change, scholars would trace how norms induce compliance. Constitutive norms not only lead to norm follow-

ing but the practice of following fundamentally reconstitutes state and non-state actors' identities, reshaping what they understand as their interests and preferences. Norms have constitutive power when they make certain ways of thinking and acting possible, and actors internalize the norm such that their norm-consistent behavior becomes part of who they are.

This is vital to the constructivist argument: social interaction is constitutive in the sense that norms change actors' behavior which in turn feeds back into and reshapes the norm. While norms do not necessarily cease to exist if they are challenged, they can no longer hold structural power in influencing actors' behavior if the majority of actors no longer follow or enforce them. This means that "in all politics...actors reproduce or alter systems through their actions," and that "any given international system does not exist because of immutable structures, but rather the very structures are dependent for their reproduction on the practices of the actors." Change may occur in the international system when "actors, through their practices, change the rules and norms constitutive of international interaction."² This process of structuration shapes our world.³

That said, constructivist debate has become increasingly cleaved between those focusing purely on norms that lead to a change in behavior (norm following or compliance) versus constitutive arguments of identity and normative contestation. Constructivists have also shifted their focus from state compliance as evidence of the importance of norms to analyze how both state and non-state actors strategically attempt to bring about normative change.⁴ A significant strand of constructivist work examines how IOs often work in conjunction with non-state actors to shape the behavior of states to become norm followers.⁵

In pursuit of its aims, this chapter begins by detailing the history and basic tenets of constructivism. It then explores key criticisms of the constructivist literature. Thereafter, this chapter details how constructivist insights are being used: not only to highlight the role of IOs in classifying and categorizing the world but also in mid-range theorizing alongside rationalist approaches to explain how norms advanced by IOs and states intersect with material interests to create new categories of action.

History and development of constructivism

This section outlines the emergence of constructivist ideas before detailing five key tenets of the approach for understanding IOs and global governance. Constructivism blossomed in the 1990s to become a dominant approach in IR in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The genesis of constructivism can be found in European philosophies that opposed the very basis on which Realism, Liberalism, and Marxism were founded. Realism is based on states maximizing their power and ensuring their survival in the international system. Liberalism is based on the reasonable actions of individuals to ensure their freedom and rights. Neoliberalism is based on the rational actions of states to maximize their utility while arguing that states can increase their gains if they cooperate within the international system. Marxism argues that inequities between classes mean that the capitalist class will use the state to enforce its position within society. Neo-Marxists such as

Robert Cox argue that hegemonic transnational bloc uses the gains from the spread of capitalism across the globe to ensure the dominance of the transnational capitalist elite. These theories build their arguments on the rational basis of the actors involved. Individuals, classes, and states generally act in rational ways to get what they want. Constructivists argue, however, that not all events occur because of rational actions, and that we can understand IR by looking at the social context in which decisions are made, which may include behavior that is not within states' national interest.

Constructivism sought to challenge the dominance of rationalist theories by emphasizing the historical, changing, and fluid nature of events, situations, and contexts in international politics. Constructivists argued that by understanding the social relations between actors and the context in which events occur can lead to a better understanding of why something occurred in the way it did and not otherwise. For example, how was it possible for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to pressure its member states to change its Articles of Agreement in the 1990s to rule out states' options to use capital controls as a viable monetary policy when it had been fundamental to the instantiation

of the IMF in 1944?⁶ How is it possible that we have a taboo over the use of chemical weapons but not over other equally atrocious means of killing?⁷ How is it possible that development is primarily understood as the level of a state's GDP but not at other measures such as the Human Development Index?⁸

The early focus on “how” and not “why” questions differentiated the constructivist endeavor from other theoretical approaches. The early constructivist challenge included opposing the scientific claims of theory, or the ability of the scholar to explain the events and actions of the international system, and predict their recurrence. Perhaps even more damning was the challenge to rationalists over their ability to determine with complete certainty cause and effect. Early constructivists argued that one cannot ascribe motivations and intentions to actors from what has occurred. One can only go by how actors act and the justifications that they give for their actions.

Yet constructivism is, like all other theories, a broad church encompassing many different, often competing, and overlapping varieties. Constructivism includes both modern and postmodern as well as critical strands.⁹ Modern constructivism

seeks to investigate how subjects and objects are created through language relations rather than the critical theory focusing on how knowledge and power determine the world in which we live. Modern constructivism therefore accepts a minimal foundation to knowledge, whereby conclusions drawn from analyzing the social world are variable and limited in time and place, rather than fixed and immutable as assumed in rationalist theorizing.^{[10](#)}

Some have argued that modern constructivism diverges from rationalist perspectives in terms of ontology (the social rather than material world) but not in terms of epistemology (discussed below) and methodology.^{[11](#)} Regarding the latter, this means that modern constructivism can use both conventional and critical tools to understand how events unfolded in one way and not another. For example, constructivists can gather evidence, conduct interviews, engage in participant observation, use discourse analysis, use process tracing, use genealogy or undertake ethnography in order to identify how ideas can lead to change or inform actors' behavior.^{[12](#)} Irrespective of the variety, all constructivists adhere to the first of the tenants set out below and situate themselves somewhere on a

continuum in agreement or disagreement with the others.

First, all constructivists argue that everything in the world is socially constructed. The only way in which we can understand IR is by examining the social relations among actors. Thus, everything that occurs in IR is a result of the interactions between actors whether they are states, IOs, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), individuals, or other social groups. Constructivism is not state-centric although many do examine how state identities are constructed and how changes to the international system may induce an identity crisis.¹³ Constructivism sought to challenge the ground upon which contemporary IR is built by rejecting the overt material focus on power, wealth, and inequality that did not examine how power, and wealth and inequality, were constructed. How actors think about our world helps construct it. Moreover, constructivism behooves us to examine why the world is constructed in one way and not another as well as how some norms seem to trump others (such as the norm of non-interference versus the Responsibility to Protect, R2P).

Second, a strong theme in constructivism is that while social and material factors matter

ideas are more important for understanding IR. While realists point to military capability, liberals point to economic wealth, and Marxists point to inequality between classes, constructivists argue that material power is not as important as the ideas that we attribute to these items. As such, how we understand these factors and the function that we attribute to them is more important than the concrete nature of the thing itself. All actors are engaged in social relations that shape their reactions but also their identities. Nature is not the primary determinant. Ideas have structural characteristics in that they “define the limits of what is cognitively possible and impossible for individuals.”¹⁴

One of the reasons for the focus on ideas in the 1990s was the rise of identity politics and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the implosion of Yugoslavia. The seemingly impossible suddenly became possible; the Cold War which for decades had seemed immutable was swept away. Yet rationalist theories had not predicted it. The field was riven with debates over why people aligned on the basis of national identities and not class, gender, or other categorizations. This helped cement the importance of constructivism.

Third, constructivists share a broad understanding of how rules and norms influence actors' identities. The social relations between actors are based on norms and rules. Norms are powerful when they are endorsed by a critical mass (or one-third of states) such that they have reached a tipping point and have cascaded throughout the international system.¹⁵ Rules shape interactions in international politics. There are diplomatic rules of engagement for everyday bilateral and multilateral interactions as well as a significant body of rules regarding appropriate conduct in warfare including the Geneva conventions on the treatment of non-combatants and prisoners of war. There are taboos on the use of chemical and biological weapons, prohibiting their use in warfare. The latter was most prominently displayed in Syria when the government was found to have used chemical weapons against its own people.¹⁶ Leading international outrage against the Syrian government was the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who called the use of chemical weapons a war crime.¹⁷

If actors do not comply with international norms, this may lead to informal or formal sanctioning procedures. Specifically, actors' may face ideational practices such as shaming, shun-

ning, and stigmatization or material economic or military sanctions to bring them into line.¹⁸ For constructivists then, it is not only that states follow rules like those codified in the Chemical Weapons Convention most of the time because they may face material sanctions from other states, but that states accept that there should be limits on the use of violence within war because it is right and legitimate. Moreover, if states continue to view these norms as important then they will remain so. Should the majority of states choose not to defend them then the norm is replaced by a new norm accepting in this case the use of chemical and biological weapons.

Fourth, as outlined earlier, constructivists aim to understand rather than explain IR. This is because constructivists attempt to draw out the social reasons for why states, IOs, and other non-state actors behave the way they do, rather than otherwise. They seek to examine the interactions between states and other social formations, which is based on attempting to understand how things came to be as they are, rather than attempting to identify the causal explanation of events. Thus, constructivists can tell us how states interpret the international system, or interpret particular events

within IR, rather than locating the cause of specific outcomes. Scholars have examined why IOs behave the way that they do and not otherwise. For example, they have “opened the black box” of IOs to analyze how the culture and internal ideas within an organization may lead to decision-making that may not seem to be in the organization’s best interests, or how an IO acts against its own mandate owing to its pathological behavior.^{[19](#)}

Fifth, early and critical constructivists reject the scientific basis of theory. The distinction between understanding and attempting to explain events is rooted in the divergent position of scholars on theory as a scientific endeavor. All rationalist theories have a commitment to positivist epistemology. Positivism is,

a belief in the naturalism of the social world ... a separation between facts and values, by which is meant both that ‘facts’ are theory-neutral and that normative commitments should not influence what counts as facts or as knowledge; a commitment to uncovering patterns or regularities in the social world...; and finally, a commitment to empiricism as what counts as knowledge.^{[20](#)}

Positivist epistemology is used by most rationalist theoretical approaches to objectively determine the main cause of events in IR. In this vein, scholars can observe what happens in IR and make inferences as to what caused certain actions and outcomes. Like the hard or physical sciences of chemistry and physics, we can make law-like generalizations about the world that are true and immutable. As with gravity, we too can have laws about IR. The strongest law-like generalization that we have is the argument that democracies do not go to war with one another. This scientific basis for the theory is such that we can posit a hypothesis—that democracies do not go to war with one another. We can then observe, gather evidence, and test our hypothesis. Each result either nullifies or proves the hypothesis. Owing to the distinction between scientific, objective, and value-free theorizing and the recognition of the value-laden, subjective, and interpretive theory espoused by constructivism, early and critical constructivists rejected the rational basis of all mainstream IR theories. They argued that no theory is value-free, but constructivists generally do not take the extra step that critical theorists do; that we as scholars impute our own values into what we see, and thus influence the out-

come. The best that we can do is attempt to recognize this reality, and analyze how all social relations influence our understanding of the social world. Thus, constructivists can observe what is occurring within the international system and attempt to understand how the social relations between actors influences who they are and how they act.

Current debates

Significant constructivist work has been done on the role of both global and regional IOs as diffusers of norms, spreading them throughout their region or the international system.²¹ IOs along with NGOs can operate to exert pressure on states to behave according to norms agreed to at the international level such as on human rights, or they can act as norm entrepreneurs to create new norms.²² IOs can do so owing to their technical expertise and moral authority.²³ Initially, constructivists attempted to demonstrate the importance of ideas in cases where material factors were absent. In reality, however, there are few situations where material factors are not present in international politics. Indeed, IOs attempt to spread norms but these

cannot be divorced from such material offerings as the European Union (EU). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU began an enlargement project to incorporate Central and Eastern European states. Tied to entry into the EU were considerable material advantages in terms of access to the common market and the ability to move capital, goods, services, and labor across borders. Constructivists examining the EU thus identified that it was not a case of when ideas versus material factors mattered. It was not an “either/or” proposition, but a “both/and.”²⁴ They therefore looked at how and if Central and Eastern European states were being socialized into the Western European norms on democracy, capitalism, and human and minority rights as part of the accession process. Were Central and Eastern European states beginning to adopt new norms on minority rights because they began to see the value of such ideas or were they induced to do so by the carrots offered? Could we argue that institutionalizing the norm through changing domestic laws and institutions was sufficient evidence of normative change or did we need to know that states internalized the norms, thus changing their identity?²⁵ The difference is discussed below.

Beyond analyzing IOs as advocates, defenders, and diffusers of norms, constructivists also began to examine what drives IO behavior and whether they are capable of change. Here the constructivist focus remained on the identity or organizational culture of an IO. For constructivists, the organizational culture informs how an IO behaves. Scholars have attempted to examine the internal norms, rules, and ideas shaping IO behavior in terms of how this limits what policy options are available in any given situation.²⁶ For scholars operating in this vein, the professional orientation of most of the staff shapes internal cultures. IO actions may stem from an organization's culture or how management and staff think they should undertake their mandate. Scholars generally agree that the reason that an IO tackles its mandate in a certain way is based upon the dominant professional culture of the organization. Medically trained staff at the World Health Organization (WHO), for example, imbue the organization with a radically different culture than if it were staffed by non-medically trained staff. This structure made it difficult to move beyond primary medical interventions when tasked with doing so. The policy options changed for the World Bank when it moved from being an insti-

tution predominantly staffed by engineers to one by economists, helping to facilitate the shift from mortar and bricks development projects to program lending.

Organizational culture can lead staff to promote norms rather than being determined by management or member states, or it may forestall the organization from changing and taking up new tasks. Much has also been made of the IMF's organizational culture based on staff's training in neoclassical economics undertaken at particular US universities in driving the institution's emphasis on capital account liberalization despite this emphasis not being within the Fund's mandate or being demanded by its powerful member states.^{[27](#)} Other examples also show when member state demands for reforming its loan conditionality stalled as a result of the IMF's organizational culture.^{[28](#)} Furthermore, organizational culture may lead to pathological or dysfunctional behavior as an IO follows its internal approach to problem-solving rather than properly addressing an issue.^{[29](#)} This can lead to organized hypocrisy as an IO attempts to continue its established practices despite pledging to change its ways to member states.^{[30](#)}

Key criticisms and emerging issues

This section highlights three main criticisms of constructivism as well as important emerging issues. From the beginning constructivists have faced three key criticisms: when norms matter, the role power plays in constructivist analysis, and the predominant focus on good norms. First, critics have alleged that constructivists choose cases where norms are important but that they do not go far enough to explain when norms and ideas matter as opposed to other factors such as power, wealth, and states' national interest. This argument was leveled by rationalists against modern constructivists over the need for a clear articulation of the scope of conditions for when ideas matter. At heart was an attempt to demand the very law-like generalizations about the role of ideas in international politics that early constructivists had rejected. The response for some was to articulate the need to specify better the scope of conditions for interrogating the impact of norms.^{[31](#)}

In a similar attack but from critical theorists came the argument that constructivists ignore

power. The focus on language and social interactions ignores how power operates through discourse to marginalize the weak and maintain a status quo. Although the continuum of constructivist work includes those more “modern” and those more “critical,” the argument turns to how power is defined. Many constructivists referenced throughout this chapter have indeed examined how ideas are mediated through IOs with asymmetric power relations and where the ideas may come from materially non-powerful actors such as IO staff and management and NGOs.

Finally, constructivists have been accused of only looking at good norms particularly on human rights. This is a valid criticism, with little work done on bad norms, their emergence, development, and distribution.^{[32](#)}

A key emerging issue for constructivism is how it is increasingly being blended with rationalist insights. Arguably constructivist success in the 1990s for occupying the “middle ground” of IR theory has also led to it being combined with rational theories.^{[33](#)} While there are constructivists that remain focused on identifying how norms are adopted, contested, and reconstituted,^{[34](#)} increasingly ideas have been combined with materialist

factors to explain IO behavior. For example, scholars seeking to bridge the rationalist-constructivist divide have combined organizational culture arguments with the rationalist principal-agent (P-A) model. Within the P-A model, IOs are treated as agents that have been contractually tasked by the member state principals to undertake activities mandated by states. IOs have various levels of autonomy and discretion to undertake their tasks but have their own preferences and interests, which may diverge from those of their collective principals. Advocates of the blended P-A model and organizational culture have argued that IO change is possible if member state “principals” ensure that their reforms are “adjacent to existing norms (i.e. they ‘fit’ within the existing culture).”³⁵

Subsequently, scholars have increasingly moved toward the use of mid-range theorizing to argue that both ideas and material factors matter in explaining how certain norms become predominant within IOs. For example, Alexandru Grigorescu has identified how hypotheses derived from the P-A model and organizational culture can help identify which IOs adopt bureaucratic oversight mechanisms and when.³⁶ The stripping down of constructivist insights in this manner thus contributes

to the broader rationalist project for identifying law-like generalizations about the world while at the same time recognizing that the process under examination also creates new categories of action.

Conclusion

This chapter provides an overview of the main tenets of constructivism as a social approach to understanding IR. Driven by the position that everything in the world is socially constructed, constructivists carved out a position between the mainstream focus on rational action that informs theorizing about Realism, Liberalism, and Marxism and critical theory in which there is no foundation to knowledge, and in which power and knowledge shape our world. The five key tenets of constructivism are: (i) the world is socially constructed; (ii) both ideas and material factors matter, but ideas are more important for understanding IR; (iii) norms and rules influence actor's identities; (iv) the constructivist approach is to understand not explain IR; and (v) early and critical constructivists reject the positivist epistemology used by rationalist theories.

That said, there are distinct variations in and of constructivism. Arguably there are now more constructivists that seek to explain events in IR that employ a positivist epistemology rather a critical one. Moreover, there is an increasing move toward mid-range theorizing in terms of using both ideas and material factors to explain how IOs behave, including creating new categories of action. In some senses, the discipline of IR may have moved beyond theoretical grand debates; but while the middle blends ideas and material factors, critical constructivists remain committed to the five tenets highlighted herein. Constructivists of all types remained focused on identifying how and when ideas shape IO behavior, and how norms transform global governance.^{[37](#)}

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