

## CHAPTER 6

# Social Constructivism

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### ■ Summary

This chapter introduces social constructivist theory of IR. We first clarify where constructivism comes from and why it has established itself as an important approach in IR. Constructivism is examined both as a meta-theory about the nature of the social world and as a substantial theory of IR. Several examples of constructivist IR-theory are presented, followed by reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the approach.



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## Introduction

The focus of **social constructivism** (in shorthand: constructivism) is on human awareness or consciousness and its place in world affairs. Much IR-theory, and especially neorealism, is *materialist*; it focuses on how the distribution of material power, such as military forces and economic capabilities, defines balances of power between states and explains the behaviour of states. Constructivists reject such a one-sided material focus. They argue that the most important aspect of international relations is social, not material. Furthermore, they argue that this social reality is not objective, or external, to the observer of international affairs. The social and political world, including the world of international relations, is not a physical entity or material object that is outside human consciousness. Consequently, the study of international relations must focus on the ideas and beliefs that inform the actors on the international scene as well as the shared understandings between them (see web link 6.01).

The international system is not something 'out there' like the solar system. It does not exist on its own. It exists only as an intersubjective awareness among people; in that sense the system is constituted by *ideas*, not by material forces. It is a human invention or creation not of a physical or material kind but of a purely intellectual and ideational kind. It is a set of ideas, a body of thought, a system of norms, which has been arranged by certain people at a particular time and place.

If the thoughts and ideas that enter into the existence of international relations change, then the system itself will change as well, because the system consists in thoughts and ideas. That is the insight behind the oft-repeated phrase by constructivist Alexander Wendt: 'anarchy is what states make of it' (1992). The claim sounds innocent but the potential consequences are far-reaching: suddenly the world of IR becomes less fixated in an age-old structure of anarchy; change becomes possible in a big way because people and states can start thinking about each other in new ways and thus create new norms that may be radically different from old ones.

This chapter introduces constructivist theory of IR. We first clarify where constructivism comes from and why it has established itself as an important approach in IR over a short period of time. The nature of constructivist theory is examined: is it a meta-theory about the nature of the social world or is it a substantial theory of IR, or is it both? That leads to a brief presentation of the constructivist contributions to IR-theory and some reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the approach.

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## The Rise of Constructivism in IR

Beginning in the 1980s, constructivism has become an increasingly significant approach, especially in North American IR. During the Cold War there was a clear pattern of power balancing between two blocs, led by the United States and the Soviet Union respectively.

After the end of the Cold War and following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the situation turned much more fluid and open. It soon became clear that the parsimonious neorealist theory was not at all clear about the future developments of the balance of power. Neorealist logic dictates that other states will balance against the US because offsetting US power is a means of guaranteeing one's own security; such balancing will lead to the emergence of new great powers in a multipolar system. But since the end of the Cold War, this has not happened; Waltz argues that it will eventually happen 'tomorrow' (2002). Another neorealist, Christopher Layne speculates that it could take some fifty years before Japan and Germany start balancing against the US (1993). The constructivist claim is that neorealist uncertainty is closely connected to the fact that the theory is overly spare and materialist; and constructivists argue that a focus on thoughts and ideas leads to a better theory about anarchy and power balancing.

Some liberals (see chapter 4) have basically accepted neorealist assumptions as a starting point for analysis; they are of course vulnerable to much of the critique directed against neorealism by constructivists. Other liberals did begin to focus more on the role of ideas after the Cold War ended. When Francis Fukuyama proclaimed 'the end of history' (1989), he was endorsing the role of ideas and especially the progress of liberal ideas in the world. But he and other liberals are mostly interested in the concrete advance of liberal, democratic government in the world. Even if constructivists are sympathetic to several elements of liberal thinking, their focus is less on the advance of liberal ideas; it is on role of thinking and ideas in general.

So the historical context (i.e. the end of the Cold War) and the theoretical discussion between IR scholars (especially among neorealists and liberals) helped set the stage for a constructivist approach. And constructivism became especially popular among North American scholars, because that environment was dominated by the neorealist/neoliberal approaches. In Europe, the International Society approach (see Chapter 5) had already to a significant extent included the role of ideas and the importance of social interaction between states in their analysis. In that sense, there was less intellectual space in Europe for constructivists to fill out.

At the same time, constructivists were inspired by theoretical developments in other social science disciplines, including philosophy and sociology. In sociology, Anthony Giddens (1984) proposed the concept of **structuration** as a way of analysing the relationship between structures and actors (see web link 6.02). According to Giddens, structures (i.e. the rules and conditions that guide social action) do not determine what actors do in any mechanical way, an impression one might get from the neorealist view of how the structure of anarchy constrains state actors. The relationship between structures and actors involves intersubjective understanding and meaning. Structures do constrain actors, but actors can also transform structures by thinking about them and acting on them in new ways. The notion of structuration therefore leads to a less rigid and more dynamic view of the relationship between structure and actors. IR constructivists use this as a starting-point for suggesting a less rigid view of anarchy.

We have noted some recent historical and theoretical developments that help explain the rise of social constructivism in IR. But constructivism has deeper roots; it is not an entirely

new approach. It also grows out of an old methodology that can be traced back at least to the eighteenth-century writings of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (Pompa 1982). According to Vico, the natural world is made by God, but the historical world is made by Man (Pompa 1982: 26). History is not some kind of unfolding or evolving process that is external to human affairs. Men and women make their own history. They also make states which are historical constructs. States are artificial creations and the state system is artificial too; it is made by men and women and if they want to, they can change it and develop it in new ways (see web link 6.03).

Immanuel Kant is another forerunner for social constructivism (Hacking 1999: 41). Kant argued that we can obtain knowledge about the world, but it will always be subjective knowledge in the sense that it is filtered through human consciousness. Max Weber emphasized that the social world (i.e. the world of human interaction) is fundamentally different from the natural world of physical phenomena. Human beings rely on 'understanding' of each other's actions and assigning 'meaning' to them. In order to comprehend human interaction, we cannot merely describe it in the way we describe physical phenomena, such as a boulder falling off a cliff; we need a different kind of interpretive understanding, or '**verstehen**' (Morrison 1995: 273–82). Is the pat of another person's face a punishment or a caress? We cannot know until we assign meaning to the act. Weber concluded that 'subjective understanding is the specific characteristic of sociological knowledge' (Weber 1977: 15). Constructivists rely on such insights to emphasize the importance of 'meaning' and 'understanding' (Fierke and Jørgensen (eds) 2001).

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## Constructivism as Social Theory

We can distinguish between theories at different levels of abstraction. Social theory is the more general theory about the social world, about social action, and about the relationship between structures and actors. Substantive IR theory is theory about some aspect of international relations. Constructivism is both a social theory and a number of different substantive theories of IR; this section is about constructivism as a social theory; the next section is about constructivist theories of IR.

In social theory, constructivists emphasize the social construction of reality. Human relations, including international relations, consist of thought and ideas and not essentially of material conditions or forces. This is the philosophically idealist element of constructivism which contrasts with the materialist philosophy of much social science positivism (see Chapter 11). According to constructivist philosophy, the social world is not a given: it is not something 'out there' that exists independent of the thoughts and ideas of the people involved in it. It is not an external reality whose laws can be discovered by scientific research and explained by scientific theory as positivists and behaviouralists argue. The social and political world is not part of nature. There are no natural laws of society or economics or politics. History is not an evolving external process that is independent of human thought

**BOX 6.1** Wendt's constructivist conception of social structures

Social structures have three elements: shared knowledge, material resources, and practices. First, social structures are defined, in part, by shared understandings, expectations, or knowledge. These constitute the actors in a situation and the nature of their relationships, whether cooperative or conflictual. A security dilemma, for example, is a social structure composed of intersubjective understandings in which states are so distrustful that they make worst-case assumptions about each other's intentions, and as a result define their interests in self-help terms. A security community is a different social structure, one composed of shared knowledge in which states trust one another to resolve disputes without war. This dependence of social structure on ideas is the sense in which constructivism has an idealist (or 'idea-ist') view of structure.

Wendt (1992: 73)

and ideas. That means that sociology or economics or political science or the study of history cannot be objective 'sciences' in the strict positivist sense of the word.

Everything involved in the social world of men and women is made by them. The fact that it is made by them makes it intelligible to them. The social world is a world of human consciousness: of thoughts and beliefs, of ideas and concepts, of languages and discourses, of signs, signals and understandings among human beings, especially groups of human beings, such as states and nations. The social world is an intersubjective domain: it is meaningful to people who made it and live in it, and who understand it precisely because they made it and they are at home in it.

The social world is in part constructed of physical entities. But it is the ideas and beliefs concerning those entities which are most important: what those entities signify in the minds of people. The international system of security and defence, for example, consists of territories, populations, weapons and other physical assets. But it is the ideas and understandings according to which those assets are conceived, organized and used—e.g. in alliances, armed forces, etc.—that is most important. The physical element is there, but it is secondary to the intellectual element which infuses it with meaning, plans it, organizes it and guides it. The thought that is involved in international security is more important, far more important, than the physical assets that are involved because those assets have no meaning without the intellectual component: they are mere things in themselves.

It is helpful to emphasize the contrast between a **materialist view** held by neorealists (and neoliberals) and the **ideational view** held by constructivists. According to the materialist view, power and national interest are the driving forces in international politics. Power is ultimately military capability, supported by economic and other resources. National interest is the self-regarding desire by states for power, security or wealth (Wendt 1999: 92). Power and interest are seen as 'material' factors; they are objective entities in the sense that because of anarchy states are compelled to be preoccupied with power and interest. In this view, ideas matter little; they can be used to rationalize actions dictated by material interest. In the ideational view held by social constructivists ideas always matter. 'The starting premise is that the material world is indeterminate and is interpreted within a larger context of meaning.

**BOX 6.2** The social constructivist view of ideas

The claim is *not* that ideas are more important than power and interest, or that they are autonomous from power and interest. The claim is rather that power and interest have the effects they do in virtue of the ideas that make them up. Power and interest explanations *presuppose* ideas, and to that extent are not rivals to ideational explanations at all . . . Let me [propose] a rule of thumb for idealists: when confronted by ostensibly “material” explanations, always inquire into the discursive conditions which make them work. When Neorealists offer multipolarity as an explanation for war, inquire into the discursive conditions that constitute the poles as enemies rather than friends. When Liberals offer economic interdependence as an explanation for peace, inquire into the discursive conditions that constitute states with identities that care about free trade and economic growth. When Marxists offer capitalism as an explanation for state forms, inquire into the discursive conditions that constitute capitalist relations of production. And so on.

Wendt (1999: 135–6)

Ideas thus define the meaning of material power’ (Tannenwald 2005: 19). This constructivist view of ideas is emphasized by Wendt in Box 6.2.

The core ideational element upon which constructivists focus is intersubjective beliefs (and ideas, conceptions and assumptions) that are widely shared among people. Ideas must be widely shared to matter; nonetheless they can be held by different groups, such as organizations, policymakers, social groups or society). ‘Ideas are mental constructs held by individuals, sets of distinctive beliefs, principles and attitudes that provide broad orientations for behaviour and policy’ (Tannenwald 2005: 15). There are many different kinds of ideas. Nina Tannenwald identifies four major types: ‘ideologies or shared belief systems, normative beliefs, cause-effect beliefs, and policy prescriptions’ (Tannenwald 2005: 15); they are described in Box 6.3.

Constructivism is an empirical approach to the study of international relations—empirical in that it focuses on the intersubjective ideas that define international relations. The theory displays some distinctive research interests and approaches. If the social and political world consists, at base, of shared beliefs, how does that affect the way we should account for important international events and episodes? Constructivists, as a rule, cannot subscribe to mechanical positivist conceptions of causality. That is because the positivists do not probe the intersubjective content of events and episodes. For example, the well-known billiard ball image of international is rejected by constructivists because it fails to reveal the thoughts, ideas, beliefs and so on of the actors involved in international conflicts. Constructivists want to probe the inside of the billiard balls to arrive at a deeper understanding of such conflicts (see web links 6.05 and 6.07).

Constructivists generally agree with Max Weber that they need to employ interpretive understanding (*verstehen*) in order to analyse social action (Ruggie 1998). But they are not in agreement about the extent to which it is possible to emulate the scientific ideas of the natural sciences and produce scientific explanations based on hypotheses, data collection

**BOX 6.3** Four types of ideas

Ideologies or shared belief systems are a systematic set of doctrines or beliefs that reflect the social needs and aspirations of a group, class, culture, or state. Examples include the Protestant ethic or political ideologies such as liberalism, Marxism, and fascism . . .

Normative (or principled) beliefs are beliefs about right and wrong. They consist of values and attitudes that specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong or just from unjust and they imply associated standards of behaviour, [for example] the role of human rights norms at the end of the Cold War . . .

Causal beliefs are beliefs about cause-effect, or means-end relationships. They . . . provide guidelines or strategies for individuals on how to achieve their objectives . . . [for example], Soviet leaders' changing beliefs about the efficacy (or more precisely non-efficacy) of the use of force influenced their decision in 1989 not to use force to keep Eastern Europe under Soviet control.

Finally, policy prescriptions are the specific programmatic ideas that facilitate policymaking by specifying how to solve particular policy problems. They are at the center of policy debates and are associated with specific strategies and policy programs.

Tannenwald (2005: 15–16)

and generalization (see Chapter 11). On the one hand, constructivists reject the notion of objective truth; social scientists cannot discover a 'final truth' about the world which is true across time and place. On the other hand, constructivists do make 'truth claims about the subjects they have investigated . . . while admitting that their claims are always contingent and partial interpretations of a complex world' (Price and Reus-Smit 1998: 272).

At the same time, it is fair to say that constructivists do not agree entirely on this issue (Fierke 2001). The view expressed here is closer to what has been called 'conventional' constructivism (Hopf 1998) represented by such scholars as Alexander Wendt (1999), Peter Katzenstein (1996b), Christian Reus-Smit (1997), John Ruggie (1998), Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (1998), Ted Hopf (2002), and Martha Finnemore (2003). 'Critical' constructivists are much more sceptical about this position; they argue that 'truth claims' are not possible because there is no neutral ground where we can decide about what is true. What we call truth is always connected to different, more or less dominant, ways of thinking about the world. Truth and power cannot be separated; indeed, the main task of critical constructivism is to unmask that core relationship between truth and power, to criticize those dominant versions of thinking that claim to be true for all. Critical constructivists include David Campbell (1998), Jim George (1994), James Der Derian (1987), R. B. J. Walker (1993), Andrew Linklater (1998) and Ann Tickner (1992). Our presentation of constructivist scholarship focuses on 'conventional' constructivism. Salient aspects of 'critical' constructivism, which we label postmodernism, are discussed in Chapter 11.

## Constructivist Theories of International Relations

Constructivism was introduced to IR by Nicholas Onuf (1989) who coined the term. It gathered a larger following among scholars with a series of influential articles and a book by Alexander Wendt (1987, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1999). We begin this brief and selective overview of constructivist IR-theory with Wendt's contribution.

The core of Wendt's argument is the rejection of the neorealist position, according to which anarchy must necessarily lead to self-help. Whether it does or not cannot be decided a priori; it depends on the interaction between states. In these processes of interaction the identities and interests of states are created. For neorealists, identities and interests are given; states know who they are and what they want before they begin interaction with other states. For Wendt, it is the very interaction with others that 'create and instantiate one structure of identities and interests rather than another; structure has no existence or causal powers apart from process' (Wendt 1992: 394). States want to survive and be secure; neorealists and constructivists agree about that. But what kind of security policy follows from this? Do states seek to become as powerful as possible or are they content with what they have? Wendt argues that we can only find out by studying identities and interests as they are shaped in the interaction between states.

In concrete terms, 'if the United States and the Soviet Union decide that they are no longer enemies, "the cold war is over"'. It is collective meanings that constitute the structures which organize our actions. Actors acquire identities—relatively stable, role-specific understanding and expectations about self—by participating in such collective meaning' (Wendt 1992: 397). West European states need not start power balancing against each other because the Cold War is over, four decades of cooperation may have led to a new 'European identity' of cooperation and friendship between them (Wendt 1992: 418) (see web links 6.16 and 6.17).

Wendt's 1999 book further develops the argument introduced in the earlier articles. His point of departure is the same as Waltz's: interaction between states in a system characterised by anarchy. But anarchy need not lead to self-help; that calls for further study of the discursive interaction between states in order to discover what specific 'culture of anarchy' that has developed between them. Wendt suggests three major ideal types of anarchy: Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian (1999: 257). In the Hobbesian culture, states view each other as enemies; the logic of Hobbesian anarchy is 'war of all against all'. States are adversaries and war is endemic because violent conflict way of survival. Hobbesian anarchy, according to Wendt, dominated the states system until the seventeenth century.

In the Lockean culture, states consider each other rivals, but there is also restraint; states do not seek to eliminate each other, they recognize the other states' right to exist. Lockean anarchy has become a characteristic of the modern states' system after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Finally, in a Kantian culture, states view each other as friends, settle disputes peacefully and support each other in the case of threat by a third party (Wendt 1999: 299). A Kantian culture has emerged among consolidated liberal democracies since the Second World War (see web link 6.14).

**BOX 6.4** Cultures of anarchy and degrees of internalization

<b>DEGREE OF INTERNALIZATION</b>	3rd			
	2nd			
	1st			
		Hobbesian	Lockean	Kantian
		<b>DEGREE OF COOPERATION</b>		

Adapted from Wendt (1999: 254)

The three different cultures of anarchy can be internalized in different degrees; that is to say, the way states view each other may be more or less deeply shared. Wendt makes a distinction between three degrees of 'cultural internalization' (Wendt 1999: 254); the first degree is a relatively weak commitment to shared ideas; the third degree a strong commitment. We get a three by three table of 'degrees of cooperation' and 'degrees of internalization' respectively (see Box 6.4).

Wendt drives home the point that constructivism is not merely about 'adding the role of ideas' to existing theories of IR. Material power and state interest are fundamentally formed by ideas and social interaction. Therefore, states in an anarchic system may each possess military and other capabilities which can be seen as potentially threatening by other states; but enmity and arms races are not inevitable outcomes. Social interaction between states can also lead to more benign and friendly cultures of anarchy.

Wendt's analysis is systemic; it focuses on interaction between states in the international system and disregards the role of domestic factors. Martha Finnemore has proposed another variant of constructivist, systemic analysis in her 1996 book, *National Interests in International Society*. Her starting point is the definition of states' identities and interests. But instead of looking at the social interaction between states, focus is on the norms of international society and the way in which they affect state identities and interests. State behaviour is defined by identity and interest. Identity and interests are defined by international forces, that is, by the norms of behaviour embedded in international society. The norms of international society are transmitted to states through international organizations. They shape national policies by 'teaching' states what their interests should be (see web link 6.18).

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Finnemore's analysis contains three case-studies: the adoption of science policy bureaucracies by states after 1955; states' acceptance of rule-governed norms of warfare; and states accepting limits to economic sovereignty by allowing redistribution to take priority over production values. The first case-study argues that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has taught states how to develop science bureaucracies. Science policy bureaucracies did not exist in many states prior to the mid-1950s. At that time UNESCO began a drive to establish them, with considerable success: they were set up in merely fourteen countries in 1955; by 1975, the number had increased to nearly ninety. UNESCO successfully propagated the idea that in order to be a 'modern civilized' state, having a science policy bureaucracy was a necessary ingredient.

The second case-study is about how states came to accept rule-governed norms of warfare. Again, the argument is that an international organization was instrumental in promoting humanitarian norms in warfare; in this case it is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The ICRC succeeded in prescribing what was 'appropriate behaviour' for 'civilized' states involved in war. This would appear to be a 'hard case' for the constructivist approach, because the ICRC could push through new norms in an area that neorealists would consider critical for national interests, namely the right to unconstrained use of force during times of war.

The third and final case-study concerns the acceptance by Third World states of poverty alleviation as a central norm of economic policy. Until the late 1960s the overriding objective of economic policy was to increase production by focusing on economic growth. By the early 1970s welfare improvement through economic redistribution became a principal goal of economic policy. Finnemore argues that this normative shift was pushed by the World Bank. The Bank's president—Robert McNamara—played an essential role; he was convinced that the bank should actively promote poverty alleviation in developing countries.

Martha Finnemore thus argues that international norms promoted by international organizations can decisively influence national guidelines by pushing states to adopt these norms in their national policies. Against neorealism, she argues that the changes brought forward by the case-studies cannot be explained by pure national interests in power-maximization. They need to be explained by a constructivist analysis emphasizing the central role of norms in international society.

Systemic constructivists such as Finnemore and Wendt stress the importance of the international environment in shaping state identities. Other constructivists put more

**BOX 6.5** Martha Finnemore on norms in international society

The fact that we live in an international society means that what we want and, in some ways, who we are are shaped by the social norms, rules, understandings, and relationships we have with others. These social realities are as influential as material realities in determining behaviour. Indeed, they are what endow material realities with meaning and purpose.

In political terms, it is these social realities that provide us with ends to which power and wealth can be used.

Finnemore (1996: 128)

emphasis on the domestic environment. One way of moving in this direction is to study how international norms have dissimilar effects in different states and then speculate about the domestic factors responsible for such variation. A volume edited by Thomas Risse (1999) takes on this task in the area of international human rights norms. The authors demonstrate how regime type, the experience of civil war and the presence of domestic human rights organizations impinge on the degree to which states are ready to comply with international human rights norms (see web link 6.19).

The book edited by Peter Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security. Norms and Identity in World Politics* (1996a) aims to drive home the general constructivist claim that culture, norms and identity matters, also in the core area of national security. In this context, many essays put special emphasis on domestic norms. Alastair Johnston, for example, takes up the case up Maoist China in order to see 'how far ideational arguments can go in accounting for realpolitik behaviour' (Johnston 1996: 217). He identifies a specific 'hard realpolitik' strategic culture in the Chinese tradition that informs and shapes Chinese security policies. The argument is that Chinese decision-makers have 'internalized this strategic culture' and that it 'has persisted across vastly different interstate systems, regime types, levels of technology, and types of threat' (Johnston 1996: 217). In other words, neorealist accounts of Chinese behaviour are incomplete because they fail to include such a notion of an idea-based strategic culture; and precisely because its presence can be show across different systems it is clear that 'anarchy' is not sufficient to account for the Chinese position.

Peter Katzenstein has written a book on Japan which further develops a constructivist argument about the role of domestic norms in the area of national security (Katzenstein 1996b). Systemic theorizing is inadequate, says Katzenstein, because it does not sufficiently appreciate how the internal make-up of states affects their behaviour in the international system. The emphasis in his analysis is on the domestic normative structure and how it influences state identity, interests and policy. A major puzzle addressed is the shift from a militaristic foreign policy before 1945 to a pacifist foreign policy after the world war. The analysis explains why there was a broad consensus favouring a militaristic foreign policy before the war and how the norms on which that consensus was based became profoundly contested as a result of the war. The military's position within the government was severely weakened; furthermore, the new

#### **BOX 6.6** Peter Katzenstein on the importance of culture and identity

Today's problem is no longer that of E.H. Carr, one of avoiding the sterility of realism and the naïveté of liberalism. Our choice is more complex. We can remain intellectually riveted on a realist world of states balancing power in a multipolar system. We can focus analytically with liberal institutionalists on the efficiency effects that institutions may have on the prospects for policy coordination between states. Or, acknowledging the partial validity of these views, we can broaden our analytical perspective, as this book suggests, to include as well culture as identity as important causal factors that help define the interests and constitute the actors that shape national security policies and global insecurities.

Katzenstein (1996a: 537)

**BOX 6.7 Ted Hopf on domestic versus systemic analysis**

Although any understanding of world politics requires a theorization of the domestic and the systemic, there would be no systemic theory of world politics because world politics has no predominant system; it has subcultures, each of which can be understood only by examining how states constitute themselves in their societies. The answer to the question of who are enemies and friends begins at home.

Finding out precisely how a state's identity affects the construction of its interests vis-à-vis another state demands that the social context in which that state's collection of identities is being discursively constructed be investigated as deeply and broadly as possible. This means exploring not only how that state's identities are produced in interactions with other states, but also how its identities are being produced in interaction with its own society and the many identities and discourses that constitute that society.

Hopf (2002: 294)

constitution committed Japan to a pacifist standing and put a low ceiling on defence expenditures (1 per cent of the national income). Again, the argument is constructivist, but a systemic analysis is rejected in favour of an analysis of the domestic environment.

Ted Hopf has made a study of Soviet and Russian foreign policy that also focuses on the domestic formation of identity in order to understand how national interests are defined and what foreign policies they lead to (Hopf 2002). He seeks to provide 'an account of how a state's own domestic identities constitute a social cognitive structure that makes threats and opportunities, enemies and allies, intelligible, thinkable, and possible' (Hopf 2002: 16).

State identity is expressed through key decision-makers. The identity of key decision-makers is uncovered through textual sources, including archives, journals, newspapers, memoirs, writers and textbooks. Two case-studies are undertaken, Moscow 1955 and Moscow 1999. The claim is that the reconstructed domestic identities go a long way in explaining Soviet/Russian foreign policy in 1955 and 1999.

Even if constructivists have a debate about the relative importance of domestic versus international environments, the disagreement between them should not be exaggerated. Constructivists are united by much more than divide them; especially, they all emphasize the importance of culture and identity, as expressed in social norms, rules, and understandings. The social and political world is made up of shared beliefs rather than by physical entities. For constructivists, that must always be the starting-point for analysis.

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## Critiques of Constructivism

Since neorealism is the main theoretical opponent for most constructivists, let us begin with a neorealist critique of the constructivist approach. First of all, neorealists 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. Ever since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, writes Stephen Krasner:

Powerful states have violated the autonomy and the integrity of weak ones. The Peace of Westphalia included elaborate provisions concerning religious practices within Germany . . . and specified electoral procedures for the selection of the Holy Roman Emperor. Hardly a testimony to respect for sovereign autonomy. Every other major postwar settlement since 1648 has attempted to restructure domestic political institutions in defeated states . . . If there is an international society out there it has not had much more impact on the behaviour of states than conventional norms about sex, family, and marriage now have on the behaviour of individuals in North America and Europe.

(Krasner 1994: 16–17)

At the same time, neorealists 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).

The major problem that states face in anarchy according to neorealists, is a problem that is not taken sufficiently analysed by constructivists; it is the problem of uncertainty (Copeland 2000). Uncertainty is about the present intentions of other states and it is about future intentions of other states. At any given moment, there may be peace and quiet in the international system. But in anarchy, states are always seeking security; moves in that direction can be misread by other states; that is what the security dilemma is all about. ‘Realism only needs states to be uncertain about the present and future interests of the other, and in anarchies of great powers, such uncertainty may often be profound’ (Copeland 2000: 200). According to Dale Copeland, Wendt’s constructivist analysis overly downplays the fact that states have difficulties in obtaining trustworthy information about the motives and intentions of other states (see web links 6.33 and 6.35).

The problem of uncertainty is significantly increased by the fact of deception. Constructivists tend to assume that social interaction between states is always sincere and that states genuinely attempt to express and understand each others’ motives and intentions. But there is a pervasive element of deception in the relations between many states. Deceptive actors ‘will stage-manage the situation to create impressions that serve their narrow ends, and other actors, especially in world politics, will understand this’ (Copeland 2000: 202). In other words, are states really peaceful or do they merely pretend to be peaceful? In the case of the Hitler–Stalin pact it was probably clear to most that it was not based on good and sincere intentions about cooperation between the two states; but it is easy to find other examples where states say one thing and mean another. The analysis by Ted Hopf introduced above, for example, ‘takes at face value comments made by Khrushchev to party gatherings praising China and advocating closer ties. In reality, that is only part of the story. That same year, 1955, Khrushchev warned West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in private conversations that China represented a real threat to the USSR and to the West . . . Which is the real

Kruschevian view of China? One cannot explain Soviet policy in 1955 without engaging in that discussion' (Stent 2005: 185).

Against this critique, constructivists will maintain that anarchy is a more complex entity than posited by neorealists. It need not always lead to self-help, mutual aggression and the risk of violent conflict. The claim by Mearsheimer, that 'realism was the dominant discourse from about the start of the late medieval period in 1300 to 1989, and that states and other political entities behaved according to realist dictates during these seven centuries' (Mearsheimer 1995b: 371) is not accurate; without incorporating a focus on ideas and social interaction, on the formation of interests and identities, it will not be possible, say constructivists, to produce a precise analysis about the nature of anarchy in particular historical periods. Furthermore, it may be true that shared ideas about friendship do not reflect a deep commitment between some states; but that point can be addressed by carefully analysing the 'degree of internalization' (see Box 6.2 above) of shared ideas. Neorealists, in turn, can retort that Wendt's 'first degree of internalization' reflects a thin commitment to shared ideas among states; at the same time this 'first degree' level is commonplace in the real world. Wendt's 'first degree' is thus in effect another way of admitting the core relevance of the neorealist analysis of anarchy.

Another critique by neorealists concerns the constructivist view of change. Constructivists 'provide few insights on why discourses rise and fall . . . [therefore, they] say little about why realism has been the dominant discourse, and why its foundations are so shaky. They certainly do not offer a well-defined argument that deals with this important issue . . . Nevertheless, [constructivists] occasionally point to particular factors that might lead to changes in international relations discourse. In such cases, however, they usually end up arguing that change in the material world drive changes in discourse' (Mearsheimer 1995b: 369). Robert Jervis contends that constructivists fail to explain 'how norms are formed, how identities are shaped, and how interests are defined as they do . . . [Constructivism] does not, by itself, tell us something about the processes at work in political life, it does not, by itself, tell us anything about the expected content of foreign policies or international relations' (Jervis 1998: 976).

Constructivists claim that they do study change. It is rather neorealism that downplays change by claiming international relations to be a 'the same damned things over and over again', that is, a constant logic of anarchy (Wendt 1999: 17). Constructivists, by contrast, claim that they most certainly study change, through the analysis of social interaction. 'Regarding the mechanisms of change, some constructivists emphasize collective learning, cognitive evolution, epistemic change and the "life cycles of norms", all of which involve the institutionalization of people's knowledge, practices and discourses' (Adler 2001: 102).

The analysis of change points to areas where constructivists can cooperate with liberals and international society theorists. Liberals (Chapter 4) focus on processes of democratization, interdependence and international institutions. These processes can act as inspiration for a constructivist interpretation of why actors choose to cooperate, even to become friends. Liberal progress can help create norms and ideas of cooperation. As for International Society theorists (Chapter 5) they emphasize the existence of common interests and common values between states. That is precisely what makes relations between states into an international

society instead of a mere 'system of states'. Constructivists can thus cooperate with liberals and International Society theorists. At the same time, International Society theorists may claim that constructivists add little news to the analysis of anarchy already produced by IS-scholars. Wendt readily admits that his identification of three cultures of anarchy is an argument that 'builds directly on Bull's' (Wendt 1999: 253). Yet it would be unfair to say that constructivists bring no news. Their emphasis on the importance of social theory and the detailed analyses of social interaction in international relations breaks new ground. And as we have seen above, several constructivists emphasize the role of domestic norms, an area little studied by International Society theorists.

Some Marxists are critical of constructivism. Wallerstein's world system theory focuses on the material structure of global capitalism and its development since the sixteenth century (see Chapter 8). That analysis leaves little room for the social interaction analysed by constructivists. Robert Cox's neo-Marxist view of 'historical structures' (see Chapter 8) makes more room for 'ideas' and will thus be more sympathetic to a constructivist approach.

In sum, neorealism remains the main contender and intellectual opponent for constructivist theory. When it comes to liberal and International Society theory, and even to some versions of neo-Marxist theory, constructivists can find more room for intellectual cooperation.

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## The Constructivist Research Programme

One ongoing debate among constructivists concerns basic social theory. The outline made above recorded the controversy between 'conventional' and 'critical' constructivists. From the 'conventional' camp, Emanuel Adler argues that in order to make an impact in the discipline of IR, constructivists need to develop 'a coherent constructivist methodological base that suggests a practical alternative to imitating the physical sciences' (Adler 2001: 109). From the 'critical' side, Maja Zehfuss wants to move in a very different direction: 'the assertion of an independently existing reality, which in itself cannot be proved and seems to demand no proof, works to support particular political positions and to exclude others from consideration' (Zehfuss 2002: 245). In other words, clarification of basic social theory is important for the constructivist research programme.

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? (see Tannenwald 2005 for an excellent discussion of these questions). Further clarification in these areas is of vital importance for the constructivist research programme.

An additional vital element in the constructivist research programme concerns the direction scholars will take in building constructivist IR theory. Is emphasis going to be put on systemic or domestic aspects? If emphasis is on systemic aspects, should theorizing focus on

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interaction between states or should it focus on normative and ideational aspects of international society? If emphasis is on domestic aspects, which domestic norms should be given attention; what are the major domestic sources of state identity? Such questions need not be very problematic. The other major theoretical approaches to IR also have a continuing discussion about the most relevant specific research focus. A comprehensive research programme will always be active in a variety of concrete areas.

Finally, it will be important for constructivists to further clarify the relationship to the approaches that have dominated IR so far: realism, liberalism, International Society and International Political Economy. To what extent are they compatible with constructivism and to what are they capable of fruitful cooperation? For example, early constructivist contributions indicated a deep gulf between materialist neorealism and a norms-idea focused constructivism. The debate has demonstrated that the gulf is much smaller: neorealists do recognize the importance of ideas (Dessler 2000); constructivists do recognize the importance of material factors. That raises the question whether constructivists will then be able to further define their own, distinctive approach to IR.

Constructivists have demonstrated that 'ideas matter' in international relations. They have shown that culture and identity help define the interests and constitute the actors in IR. All students of IR should be familiar with the important debates raised by constructivists, about basic social theory and about the different ways in which ideas can matter in international relations.



### KEY POINTS

- The focus of social constructivism is on human awareness or consciousness and its place in world affairs. The international system is constituted by ideas, not by material forces.
- Social theory is the more general theory about the social world. In social theory, constructivists emphasize the social construction of reality. The social world is not a given. The social world is a world of human consciousness: of thoughts and beliefs, of ideas and concepts, of languages and discourses. Four major types of ideas are: ideologies; normative beliefs; cause-effect beliefs; and policy prescriptions.
- Constructivist Alexander Wendt rejects the neorealist position of anarchy necessarily leading to self-help. That cannot be decided a priori; it depends on the interaction between states. In these processes of interaction the identities and interests of states are created.
- Martha Finnemore argues that identities and interests are defined by international forces, that is, by the norms of behaviour embedded in international society.
- Peter Katzenstein argues that the internal make-up of states affects their international behaviour. The approach is employed to explain the shift in Japanese foreign policy from militaristic to pacifist.

- Ted Hopf focuses on the domestic foundation of identity in a study of Soviet and Russian foreign policy. The claim is that the identities of key decision-makers go a long way in explaining foreign policy.



### QUESTIONS

- Social constructivists argue in favour of an ideational view and against a materialist view of the world. They claim that the international system is constituted by ideas, not by material forces. Explain the distinction and discuss whether it is valid.
- Is social constructivism primarily a meta-theory about the nature of the social world or is it primarily a substantial set of theories about IR?
- Identify the four types of ideas discussed by Nina Tannenwald and think of ways in which each type can influence international relations.
- Alexander Wendt says that 'if the United States and the Soviet Union decide they are no longer enemies, "the cold war is over" '. Do you agree? Why or why not?



### GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

- Adler, E. (2001). 'Constructivism and International Relations', in W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse and B. A. Simmons (eds), *Handbook of International Relations*. London: Sage, 95–118.
- Fierke, K. M., and Jørgensen, K. E. (eds) (2001). *Constructing International Relations*, Armonk: M. E. Sharpe.
- Finnemore, M. (1996). *National Interests in International Society*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Katzenstein, P. (1996b). *Cultural Norms and National Security*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Ruggie, J. G. (1998). *Constructing the World Polity: Essays on International Institutionalization*. London: Routledge.
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zehfuss, M. (2002). *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



### WEB LINKS



Web links mentioned in the chapter plus additional links can be found on the online Resource Center that accompanies this book.

[<www.oxfordtextbook.co.uk/orc/Jackson\\_sorensen3e/>](http://www.oxfordtextbook.co.uk/orc/Jackson_sorensen3e/).