

International Politics

Constructivism – Poststructuralism

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Overview

- Sociological study of global politics

- Foundational, non-foundational, positivist anti-positivist theories
- Constructivism's main tenets
- Constructivism and global politics
- Poststructuralism's main tenets
- Discourse, Genealogy, Deconstruction and Intertextuality
- Comparison to other theories of IP
- Questions of identity in world politics
- Case studies



Constructivism – theory

- Primarily based on the French sociological critical theory tradition
- Constructivism is about human consciousness and *construction* of reality
- Constructivism is a social theory, which is concerned with the interplay between structure and agency
- It is important to take seriously the role of ideas and culture in world politics
- Our mental maps are shaped by collectively held ideas, such as knowledge, symbols, language and rules
- This also influences states' identities and interests and consequently world politics
- The world is irreducibly social, actors can construct, reify and transform structures



Comparison with other IR Theories

- Neorealism: States are primary actors which live in a state of anarchy consumed by questions of security, survival and power. Ethics and norms are not central and distribution and balance of power is enough to tell us everything about the world politics
- Neoliberalism: accepted most of neorealist assumptions but is more optimistic about possibilities of cooperation. The major issue to build is trust that could be done through IOs
- Both these are fundamentally based on fixed elements of individualism and materialism. Nature vs Nurture?
- Constructivism distinguishes itself from rational choice theories (e.g. realism, liberalism) which assume fixed preferences among global actors
- Neorealism and neoliberalism allow for the possibility that ideas and norms can constrain how states pursue their interests but they don't consider how ideas and norms could define those interests
- Constructivism on the other hand postulates that social forces such as ideas, knowledge, norms and rules also influence states' identities and interests and the very organisation of world politics



Philosophical foundations

- Constructivism is not a “substantive” theory. It does not purpose specific claims and hypotheses about world politics, such as democratic peace theory or self help for example
- It refutes principles of positivism and rationalism. Social sciences are not actually real science. This is opposed to assumptions of rational choice theory
- Constructivists reject the idea that the methods of the natural sciences are appropriate for understanding the social world
- Questions definition of dependent and independent variable as proposed by positivism
- Idealism (as defined in sociology) and holism are two main pillars of constructivism
- Individuals and states are produced and created by their cultural environment



Constructivism – Key tenets

- No fixed universal elements of interest. Identity and norms shape interests
- **Culture** informs the meanings that people give to their action
- There are no timeless laws because actors learn about and interpret their context
- Contrary to rational choice theories, constructivists therefore talk about actors' **practices** rather than behavior
- Constructivists also examine how actors make their activities meaningful
- The fixing of meaning is an accomplishment that is the essence of politics – and thus **power** and power brokerage



Constructivism's assumptions

- Power thus has an ideational component

- Constructivism studies how nationalism, ethnicity, race, gender and religion are each involved in international politics
- Questions of identity try to explain why states interact with each other the way they do:
 - Ally, enemy, neutral, aggressive, terrorist, democratic, fascist, communist.
 - Examples: how do you perceive these countries: Saudi Arabia, Russia, Israel, Canada, Mexico
 - Ethnic cleansing in northern Syria by Turkish army? Operation Olive Branch!!!
- Perception forms foreign policy



Constructivist Balance of Power

- In realism the BoP was that states react against hegemon in the region, but for Constructivism this is not adequate
- States react only against a threatening hegemon, Balance of Power becomes Balance of Threat or perception of threat
- Security dilemma exist only in the presence of threat, or perception of potential threat.
 - Ex: EU did not react against the US but against Russia which was regarded as a threat
 - Ex Germany and Iran armaments. North Korea sees the US as a threat not China
 - France's nuclear capabilities versus Iranian nuclear program
- US allies with countries seen as “pro-American”

Identification in Foreign Policy

- Assessments of foreign policy are what makes those policies
- Selective IR diplomacy: Constructivism allows us to understand why for example the US is realist towards Iran, liberal (?) towards China, Democratic peace theory towards Italy and Germany
- States do not naively subscribe to liberalism all the time
- Countries can be different in different situations, yet all of them constantly crave for legitimacy
- Nasser, Khomeini, Saddam, Erdogan all hoped that the regional countries see them as allies
- Anarchy in IR does not exist, it is an imagined situation, it is what we make of it to be
- Constructivism validates several of liberal assumptions such as on alliances
- Deep cooperation among states leads to liberal form of interactions, but when in doubt realism is the default route
- Constructivists complain that neo-realists and institutional neo-liberalists fail to explain contemporary **global transformations**. Ex. EU's drive towards full integration and reversals on several occasions. Ex. End of the Cold War



Transformations of the World Politics I

- Norms evolve in stages

- **Norm emergence** can be pushed by norm entrepreneurs, who devise selling 'frames' to promote their ideas
- **Norm cascade** is driven by a dynamic of imitation as norm leaders try to socialize other states to become norm followers
- **Norm internalization** means that the norm is taken for granted and is no longer contested
- For example how to treat war prisoners: do countries now execute war prisoners summarily on the battle ground? With the exception of Turkey, ISIS and Taliban most others don't.



Transformations of the World Politics II

- **Diffusion** asks how particular models, practices, norms, etc. spread within a social formation
- **Institutional isomorphism:** observes that organizations that share the same environment will, over time, resemble each other.
- There will thus eventually be convergence around a single model
- Coercion, strategic competition, pressures to secure resources, mimicking of successful models, **institutionalization, socialization** etc. generate a constant diffusion of ideas

Case Study 1: Social construction of refugees

- The crucial question: who is a refugee?
- It was not until WW1 that states recognized people as refugees and gave them rights
- The High Commissioner began to apply refugee status to more groups than had been originally included
- After WW2, the definition was modified so as not to include people outside Europe before again being expanded



Case Study 2: 'Human Rights Revolution' and Torture

- Contrary to natural law, constructivists view human rights as an agreement among states to recognize new categories of rights
- Rights do not exist unless states declare them to, identifying with their tenets in the process
- Thus, torture has come to be viewed as an uncivilized/inhumane practice
- This view/norm was then institutionalized in the international humanitarian law, which most states have ratified



Poststructuralism

Poststructuralists assumptions

- Poststructuralists argue that our **ontological assumptions** matter greatly for how we view the world
- They further embrace a **post-positivist epistemology** as they argue that we cannot understand world politics through causal cause-effect relationships
- It refutes positivism due to the belief that the social world is very different from the scientific world
- In this view, the structures that constitute the political are constituted through human action and cannot be treated as independent variables
- Once more: through foundational theories we can say where something is true or not by examining facts. Anti/non-Foundationalists believe that the very notion of truth and fact differ from setting to setting and one can not find THE fact.



Poststructuralism's fundamentals

- Poststructuralism and postmodernism are closely related terms
- Poststructuralism and postmodernism came to existence following theories of language of 1910s and 1920s which were called structuralism
- Ferdinand de Saussure structuralism early 1900s later borrowed into other fields of humanity mainly by the likes of Claude Levi-Strauss
- Meta-narratives: interpretive frameworks within which we give meaning to other things, such as Christianity, science, justice, freedom etc.
- For example most ideas of absolutism could be traced back to our background religious convictions which could form meta-narratives about the structure of public power



Poststructuralism elements: Discourse

- Poststructuralism understands language not as a neutral transmitter, but as producing meaning
- Material things only come to have meaning as they are represented by particular words and images
- The prevalent **discourse** thus forms and informs our take on things and events, as it structures our thoughts
- Language and discourse create meaning and power
- We can not transmit our thoughts to others without a set of shared codes and the way we construct these codes does have implications for the meaning we transmit
- Lexicon's networking structure. Language created thought or vice versa?
- Linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge

Poststructuralism elements: Intertextuality

- We live in the house of language, reality is textual
- We can understand the social world as comprising of texts
- Texts form an ‘intertext’ – they are in some ways linked to texts that came before them
- Intertextuality may also involve images, or interpreting events that are not exclusively written or spoken
- Popular culture and media releases are thus reasonable objects of study – because they link to other ‘texts’
- Ex. Trump claimed that Middle East is filled with ancient hatred and wars, implying a more barbaric and pre-modern environment

Poststructuralism elements: Deconstruction

- The codes of words are never truly fixed, because the connections *between* words (that create meaning) is never given once and for all
- Hierarchical dichotomies (such as “civilized” – “barbaric”) can make a description seem objective and factual, when it is in fact a structured set of values
- The concomitant aim therefore lies in problematizing dichotomies, show how they work and thereby open alternative pathways
- Deconstruction (Jacques Derrida) is about denaturalising the meta-narratives, Seeing behind the veil of the language of our everyday life.
- Example of dichotomies: order vs anarchy, trust vs suspicion, cooperation vs self-help, peace vs war, order vs anarchy etc.

Poststructuralism elements: Genealogy

- Defined as the ‘history of the present’: What political practices have formed the present, and which alternative understandings and discourses have been marginalized and often forgotten?
- What constructions are dominant, and how do these constructions relate to past discourses?
- One example is “biopolitics” in norms related to body disciplining: abstinence before marriage, use of contraception, clothing etc.



Poststructuralism and Power

- Poststructuralism is about fighting meta-narratives
- Poststructuralists are very pessimistic to be able to completely eliminates meta-narratives
- Meta-knowledge is regarded as dangerous as we mix them with reality
- The language of universalism is denounced as being attached to a particular position of power
- For poststructuralists power is the discursive ability to determine what is normal



The Concept of Power

- **Power** comes about when **discourses** constitute particular subject positions as the 'natural' ones
- Discourse of power lies in what we see as reasonable, rational normal and good
- Thus, political 'actors' do not exist outside of discourse
- This relationship between power and discourse is crucial to post-structuralist analyses
- Here power goes much beyond the realist assumptions of power as materiality. In poststructuralism the focus is on how actors get to be constituted as actors in the first place
- Ex. Axis of evil!

Michel Foucault

- Interested in the mentally ill, prisoners, homosexuals
- historical growth of constellation of power, how we deal with those who fall out of our “norms”
- Modern institutions, nationally and internationally are made only to measure the judge deviance
- We might think we are free agents, but we are historically produced. He calls this a genealogy of subjectivity
- Genealogy, a term originally taken from Nietzsche, we study things historically to understand the values that we hold today. It presents present truths to historical scrutiny
- Panopticon and self-surveillance, developing Bentham’s original thoughts

Denouncing elements of International Politics

- IP is built upon the idea of self versus other
- Clash of civilisations!
- Encounter between self and the other is threatening, destabilizing
- The relation between self and other is hierarchised, the other is regarded inferior, horizontal encounter transforms into hierarchical, superior and inferior.
- Der Derian: collective imagination of conflict is productive of war. We are not fighting other humans we are fighting monsters
- Wars are to destroy monsters without being hurt!

Identity and foreign policy

- Foreign policies constitute the identity of the Self through the construction of threats/ dangers – the Other(s)
- Identities depend on discursive practices – they are ‘real’ but this ‘realness’ needs to be constantly reproduced
- Identity is not something someone has, but is a position one is constructed as having through social-linguistic processes
- Identities are simultaneously the product of and the justification for foreign policies
- When poststructuralists write about identities as constituted in discourse, they usually use the term ‘subjectivities’
- Identity is thus relational and performative (Judith Butler)



Poststructuralist theoreticians of IP

- R. J. B. Walker: Sovereignty is a solution to the problem of universal versus particular, space versus time. Inside there is space and peace and good life outside time stops, war and violence
- Ashley challenges the naturalization of knowledge in IR
- Der Derian focuses on the concepts of warfare and conflict



Case study 1: Islam

- Right wing parties: Islam, violent and proto-terrorist , even if they might be peaceful this is because they haven't been given full chance
- Left political parties: Islam is not violent or a threat, it is just less developed, less involved and engaged in civil society and in need of some emancipations
- Poststructuralists challenges both these views. Such meta-narratives on Islam are all from a western point of view and our constructed realities

Case study 2: Foreign policy and identity construction – Russia and Crimea

- March 16th, 2014: referendum in Ukraine territory of Crimea → region to become part of Russia
- Different discourses emerged:
- Western discourse on Russia as the aggressor:
 - NATO: condemned events as an ‘annexation’ that violates international law
 - European states, USA, Canada: economic sanctions on Russia
- Russian discourse emphasized identity:
 - events do not constitute annexation but a logical and rightful ‘return’ of Crimea to its ‘natural place’
- Who constructs what discourses and for what purposes?

Case study 3: Discourses on the Ebola outbreak 2014 and COVID19

- Outbreak of Ebola virus in West Africa, 2014: ‘disease’ was internationally declared as an ‘epidemic’ or a ‘pandemic’
- Policies towards epidemics don’t simply tackle material problems, they also constitute the disease in certain ways
- It invokes a particular threatening discourse, which calls for urgent measures
- Who has the responsibility and the right to declare something to be an epidemic and formulate responses? Responsibilities of states and international institutions
- How are global power relations played out/effected by such discourses?



Summary

- Different between poststructuralism and constructivism
- Foundational, non-foundational , positivist, anti-positivist theories , rational choice theories
- The role of culture. Social world compared to scientific world
- Transition and transformation of interests, and idea
- Idealism and Holism
- Jacques Derrida and Deconstruction
- Michel Foucault and Genealogy
- Four concepts of poststructuralism: Discourse, deconstruction, genealogy and intertextuality
- Poststructuralism is accused of using complex unintelligible language which once cut through, not much substance is left
- How about the actual material processes? Those that actually do happen outside discursive acts?
- Identity and Foreign Policy, how does this differ from recent work by liberals institutionalism like Fukuyama?



Debate

- Why studying popular culture has any importance in international politics?

- Poststructuralism is sometimes claimed to be promoting a hateful view towards Western culture in what sense do you think this might be true?
- Do you think constructivism and structuralism will inevitably lead to a realm of relativity that could potentially threaten any “constructed” field of human knowledge including the critical theories themselves?
- Is it true that all IP is based on constructed image of the other